

WHERE MEN STILL DREAM
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CONTENTS

- | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------|
| 1 Deck Boy | 16 Middle East |
| 2 Royal Air Force | |
| 3 Flying, Fishing and Whaling | |
| 4 Under Sail | |
| 5 The Loneliest Isle | |
| 6 Round Africa | |
| 7 The Isle of Yesterday | |
| 8 Heart of Darkness | |
| 9 South African Wilderness | |
| 10 The Great South-West | |
| 11 Last of the Cave Men | |
| 12 Kalahari Journey | |
| 13 Old Africa Unchanged | |
| 14 African Paradise | |
| 15 South African Air Force | |

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

The author and Titus Matthys, a famous Southern Kalahari hunter.

Gannets (malgas) on a South African guano island.

Stampede of seals on a South African guano island as the author approaches with his camera.

Tristan da Cunha islanders in one of their canvas boats arrive alongside a visiting cruiser. This picture was taken by the author in 1923, when H. M. S. Dublin called.

A Zanzibar coffee-seller ... and his customer.

Old Abraham, the centenarian Bushman, photographed by the author in the Kalahari

Ovambo metal-workers with their primitive bellows.

Otjikoto crater lake – the “pool of death” near Tsumeb, South-West Africa. One of the landmarks on route to Ovamboland.

The seven wives of an Ovambo headman in their finery – oxhide skirts, copper bangles and ivory charms.

The end of the day’s hunting – an Okavango scene.

A promising spot for crocodiles. The author waiting for a shot below the Popa rapids, Okavango river, South-West Africa.

The author surveys the shattered centre of Tobruk. He is standing in the “municipal gardens” outside the town hall.

CHAPTER 1

DECK BOY

AFRICA IS the one continent I know from end to end. I have tried to work in London, but I yearned for sun and solitude. Paris I enjoyed, and in New York I found much to do. You can put me down on the waterfront of Rio or Calcutta, Beirut or Rangoon, and I will find my way round the town again. I have also searched for islands of ease and escape. The beachcombers and the lazy island peoples have always ranked high in my esteem. On the screen of memory I can see many a pleasant isle, the tropic scents return, faces are clear, colours vivid in the sunlight. I have met the men who sail round the world alone in small boats, and learnt their secrets. Yes, I can lead the way to many a “Shangri La” and

safe refuge from the poison of civilisation.

But in Africa I am really at home, whether I am flying up the Great Rift Valley, voyaging on the Congo or the Nile, steaming along the desert coasts or hot green shores, dining gaily with old friends in Cairo or swimming from the Cape beaches. Africa has filled my life with the fascination of living, and I want no other land. When I am far from Africa and I smell wood smoke, then the nostalgia is instantly upon me and I know that soon I must return. Over the sights of my rifle, just for a moment, a springbok stands, and beyond the buck there is a great sweep of yellow grass and khaki sand – the Kalahari. Oh, no, you may cling to your teeming cities, but let me roam in Africa.

My father was editor of the Kimberley newspaper when the diamond town was besieged by the Boers. I was born there during the siege, early in 1900. Cecil Rhodes and other famous men were among my father's friends, and I heard many anecdotes of those stirring days on the diamond fields. I shall not deal from hearsay, however, with a period which my father has described in a book of his own.

I am a writer, but as a youth I longed for a career at sea. At fourteen I had already made several voyages with my parents between Cape Town and England. One of those ships was so old that she was square-rigged on the foremast. I can remember the sailors clambering out on the yardarms, making sail when there was a following wind. I became restless, and this nagging spirit has never left me.

As a schoolboy I spent all my spare time on the wharves of Table Bay Docks, or afloat in tugs with friendly skippers, or sailing small boats on Table Bay. I paced the splintered decks of the clipper Cutty Sark when she was towed in dismasted. Great days, wonderful times! I can still find peace of mind on that busy waterfront.

One day when I was sixteen I saw a notice scrawled in chalk on the blackboard outside the shipping master's office. "Deck boy wanted – S.S. Ingerid." The long school holidays had started. It was December of 1916, a grim year; though to my mind, at that age, a war seemed no more than an opportunity for adventure, and I was determined to reach the war before the end. Another year at school stretched out in gloomy prospect before that would be

possible. But meanwhile, here was the Ingerid, and I was free for two months.

A friend was with me, a tough fellow of Scandinavian extraction. I led the way up the Ingerid's gang-plank. The master heard my story. Both of us wanted to go, of course, but there was only one berth. "I'll take you – be on board to-morrow morning at seven," decided the master, pointing at me. My persuasive tongue had done the trick, as it has done often since. But it was an unwise choice by the master of the Ingerid, for he would have secured twice the work from my muscular friend.

I have made many mistakes in my life, but it was no mistake when I left my comfortable home and carried my kit-bag on board the Ingerid next morning before seven. Again and again since then I have exchanged comfort for

hardship, and sometimes a safe routine for danger. On the whole, however, Africa has been kind to me, my luck has been fantastic, and I have no regrets.

The Ingerid was a coaster, one of those strong old ships built of iron at Glasgow in the 'eighties, before the days of cheap steel. She defied all the battering's of the sea for nearly fifty years. When I joined her she had reached middle-age without showing many signs of it. If she had a fault it was the lack of steam steering gear; but that I was to discover later. On the first day I carried loaves of bread on board and stowed beer bottles. I was on the fo'c'sle head with the mate handling the hawsers when the ship was warped across from one berth to another with the aid of her winches. And I learnt to polish brass and scrub

white paintwork. In the late afternoon the Ingerid slipped out past the clock tower for open sea.

It was a short run, that first one, the run of sixty miles northwards to Saldanha Bay. I have sailed there often since then in small yachts. Saldanha is the finest harbour in Southern Africa, perfectly sheltered and large enough for whole fleets to anchor; but owing to a lack of fresh water it had never been developed. The Ingerid was bound for the whaling stations in the southern arm of the bay. For days we lay there while the drums of whale oil thundered down to the wharf and the cargo winches rattled them on board.

I fell under the spell of Saldanha. This was the port of the old navigators, and if you stand in the breeze on the south head of Saldanha you will need little imagination to see the long procession

of ships making the bay. First the daring Portuguese caravels, high-pooped, with stern lanterns, curving yards and a great spread of canvas that must have brought all hands cursing on deck to shorten sail. Then the Dutch East India Company's ships, spice-laden, but manned by weary crews yearning for fresh meat to cure their scurvy. English ships, too, bound for the Indies, cannon ready at the gun ports. Pirate craft, schooner rigged, and eager to loot the Company's station at Saldanha. Brigantines from the Bermuda's with slaves. Reeking American whalers of the old type, with swift boats at the davits and tripods on deck. Corvettes, sloops, gunboats of the British Navy, every brass rail gleaming in the sun. Modern grey cruisers, lean and destructive. Huge

whale factory ships, mothering their fleets of chasers.

Three white bird islands lie in the entrance – Jutten, Marcus and Malagas – but there are deep passages between, through which ships of any size may enter. Jutten Island is the grave of the Dutch East India Company's ship *Meresteyn*. She was lost while sailing into the bay at night, and broke up before her money chests could be saved. I have seen many sea-worn ducatoons bearing the head of Philip IV of Spain washed up by gales on Jutten Island. Attempts were made by the Dutch East India Company to reach the treasure, but all failed owing to the exposed position of the wreck. She is still there, in fourteen fathoms, and once I considered hiring a diver to bring up the rest of the ducatoons. I was advised that the price of the silver

might not cover the expenses of recovery. A syndicate worked on another sunken wreck in Saldanha Bay some years ago, and brought up bars of metal encased in rotting timber. Samples were rushed to Cape Town for the analyst's judgment. It was iron ballast. One of the Saldanha fishing boats today carries as ballast this iron from an East Indiaman sunk in battle more than one hundred and fifty years ago.

The wreck of a wooden ship rests in the lagoon at Saldanha – the wreck, so they say, of a pirate ship loaded with treasure. I should like to charter a little cutter with diving apparatus to search for this wreck, for diving is easy in the calm lagoon. There is undoubtedly a great quantity of old Chinese porcelain awaiting recovery in Saldanha Bay; some of it was brought to the surface

forty years ago. The sea had not harmed it. During the salvage the diver was attacked by a great octopus. He rose in a hurry, and killed his terrible enemy with a charge of dynamite. But much of the porcelain remains, like a ghostly tea party set out on the floor of the lagoon for the drowned sailor men.

The whaling stations where the Ingerid lay formed a corner of Norway in South Africa. I came to know the Norwegians well in later years and, as I shall describe elsewhere, I went out hunting whales with these modern Vikings.

Eighteen men took the Ingerid to sea, and there were odd characters among them. The master had been an officer in a great company, but he had been on shore for twenty years – the story on board was that he found a job inland as an auctioneer. It was

obvious, even to the deck boy, that he had forgotten some of his seamanship; and that in any case he would have been more at home as a liner officer than in command of a small coaster. As a result, our arrivals and departures were watched with breathless interest, for our captain's handling of the ship was unpredictable.

When the Ingerid left the whaling station at Saldanha I was helping the Bo 'sun cast off the stern lines. We had been lying alongside an ancient wooden sailing ship hulk which served as a jetty. The bows of the Ingerid swung out, and should have moved surely towards the bay. Instead, the horrified Bo 'sun observed that she was going slowly astern towards the hulk. "Full speed ahead!" roared the Bo 'sun, dancing in his agitation. Three times he shouted, and at last we

saw our captain gazing astern, puzzled. But it was too late then. The stern of the Ingerid crashed into the hulk and brought a load of rotten timber down on her decks. A less sturdy ship would have been damaged; but the tough, iron Ingerid took the shock in her stride. After examining the rudder we made a more successful departure.

The incident left its mark on the nervous master. Owing to the size of the ship he was expected to dock and undock in most ports without the aid of tug or pilot. No doubt this preyed on his mind, for he sat alone brooding in his cabin and refreshing himself with endless trays of tea. A dozen times a day the second steward would dash up the bridge ladder in reply to that insatiable thirst.

The Ingerid's chief steward was, within his limits, one of the most efficient and resourceful men I have ever met. Although rated as steward, he was the best seaman in the ship; and whenever there was a skilled job to be done on deck, the master yelled, "Black – John Black," and the steward appeared. Black was the only man trusted to take soundings. Black was a chess player, and he taught me the game. During that voyage he also taught the captain. That was a mistake, for the captain became so deeply addicted to chess that the board had to be brought immediately after breakfast, and until late at night captain and steward played game after game. Tea was served at frequent intervals, and the steward became sick of his own hobby. The most irritating part of it, as he confided to me, was

that the captain became unbeatable. When the captain saw that he had made a false move he would remark; “Ah, yes – I didn’t see that.” He would then move his piece out of danger, and the steward dared not protest.

The Ingerid was on the point of departure from one of the coast ports, and the steward and I were seated on a deck bench with the chess board between us, absorbed in our battle. Suddenly the board went up in the air. A tornado in the shape of the captain had come from the bridge to see that all hands were at their stations before the ship put to sea. He swept through the galley, driving cook and galley-boys before him. “All hands! All hands!” But there was no emergency. Our captain was merely taking every precaution against another unfortunate

incident such as that on leaving Saldanha.

We discharged our cargo of whale oil drums at Durban – a wartime Durban filled with grey ships and white hospital ships from East Africa. Then the sacks of sugar came on board and filled the holds to the hatches. The Ingerid blundered out of Durban bay and pointed her weather-beaten snout down the coast. Fortunately for all of us, the captain had not forgotten his navigation. He could find all the ports of call – only the entries and departures were so difficult.

One day the captain, bored at last with chess, sent for “that boy Green” and announced that he would teach me to steer. This was a proud moment. I had handled the wheel often enough on board harbour tugs; but now I was to “take a trick” at sea. I learnt to repeat

the course, to meet the seas, to follow the swing of the compass card. At first it seemed easy; and the captain, satisfied that I would not put the ship ashore, went off to his cabin and rang for tea. At the end of an hour, I was tired and thirsty. The Ingerid, nearly 200 feet in length and of 693 tons, may have been too small for steam steering gear, but she was too large for me to steer comfortably by hand. Hoffman, the second steward, came up the bridge ladder with another tray of tea. I nearly snatched it out of his hands, but the kicking wheel demanded all my attention. Never was the relief more welcome. I was learning the meaning of hard work on board the Ingerid.

Hoffman was another of the Ingerid's queer characters. He had been a tailor, earning a good living. Then, as he

said; "I went mad and signed on aboard the Ingerid." He was a Jew, and you will find few Jews afloat. But he remained at sea for a long spell, drawing perhaps a third or a quarter of the money he could have made as a tailor. After a time he decided to sign as ordinary seaman rather than as second steward. He had retained one relic of his tailoring days – a morning coat, striped trousers and top-hat, and often in port he delighted his shipmates by marching down the gangway in this outfit, looking like a prosperous young Jewish doctor. I cannot explain the madness of Hoffman, unless the call of the sea is stronger and more sustained than most people realise. I last saw him polishing the enormous binnacle above the captain's cabin. Probably he was

puzzled himself about the strange forces at work within him.

Our last port of call before Cape Town was the little harbour of Mossel Bay, and here exciting news awaited us. (Needless to say, the Ingerid carried no wireless.) A German raider had been at work in the South Atlantic, mines had been laid off the Cape, ships were being sunk. The Ingerid was given a course calculated to take her clear of danger. I felt a long way from school as I helped to provision and swing out the lifeboats. The captain and John Black, I remember, stowed their best clothes in the boats, and then were ready for any encounter. Rather to my disappointment, we made Table Bay without sighting the raider.

The Ingerid discharged her sugar and sailed again almost immediately in

ballast for "the islands." You will need an Admiralty chart to find all of that queer string of strangely named guano islands owned by the Union Government. They lie close inshore along the coast of South-West Africa, about five hundred miles to the north of Table Bay. Isles of adventure indeed, each one with a romantic story.

Outside the breakwater the seas ran crisp, rainbow-tinted as the sun died. The wake seethed and whitened, there was a steady following wind, and three days steaming brought us to the first island of the group. This was Ichaboe (pronounced "Itcha-boo," like a sneeze), the smallest of all, less than a mile in circumference, but yielding more guano than any of the others.

Guano has been crudely defined as "fish that has passed through the

systems of sea-birds.” It is a white wealth, one of the most valuable of fertilisers. The discoverer of these islands was Captain Benjamin Morrell of the American sealing schooner Antarctic. He landed on Ichaboe more than a century ago in search of seals, when charts of that coast were still vague. He wrote a book about his voyages and suggested that Ichaboe might be used as a base for trade with the Hottentots on the mainland. Birds’ eggs, leopard skins, ivory, ostrich feathers – all these things he mentioned. Then, casually, as an afterthought, he wrote; “The surface of this island is covered with birds’ manure to a depth of twenty-five feet.”

Morrell, in spite of his keen business instinct, sailed away and missed an enormous fortune. The guano was, at that time, worth £9 a ton. Islands off

Peru were supplying the world with phosphates. An enterprising Liverpool ship-owner who had been in the Peru trade read Morrell’s book and then sent a schooner south to locate Ichaboe. They sailed secretly, but on their return to Liverpool the sailors talked, and a boom started as feverish as a gold or diamond rush. In one of those early years, guano worth £2,500,000 was removed from the islands.

Ichaboe became a new El Dorado. It was a “no man’s land” as well, and rival crews fought bitterly with knives, belaying pins and fists for the wealth that lay heaped under the sun. The scene may be imagined when it is recalled that more than four hundred ships lay at anchor off Ichaboe on one day a hundred years ago, and that six thousand men were toiling on the

island “claims.” One skipper brought up a gang from Cape Town armed with revolvers and cutlasses, determined “to die on Ichaboe or get all the stuff off.” After much bloodshed, two frigates of Her Majesty’s Navy, Thunderbolt and Thunderer, restored order. Britain annexed the islands, and finally the guano collection became a State Industry.

The outstanding character on Ichaboe at the time of my visit, and for many years afterwards, was an Italian named Emilio Barbieri. (I met him again when he retired after thirty years as island headman. The poor old man was lost in Cape Town, and did not know what to do. He found a cottage in the country in the end, and painted “Ichaboe” on the gate.)

Barbieri was always known as “Mister Milo.” In his prime he had the frame and muscles of a wrestler, and a face tanned to mahogany by the suns and winds of the South Atlantic. Once he spent forty-seven months at a stretch on this desolate, waterless island, but usually he went to Cape Town on leave every year.

“Mister Milo” came to Ichaboe in the ‘nineties as a young sailor man in a full-rigged ship and found the job which became his life’s work. I admired his seamanship as he brought the lean, doubled-ended whaler out to the Ingerid from the surf-beaten shore.

And I was glad that he was handling the steering oar when I leapt into the boat and raced towards the stony beach in a welter of green sea.

“Mister Milo” told me of the foreign legion of broken men who drifted to Ichaboe as sealers and guano collectors – men who left the past over the horizon when they signed on for work on the island. “There was a doctor, struck off the rolls – but he still had his knowledge and he was useful here,” recalled Milo. “Aye, and clergymen, too, and men of every nation and colour. There is no drink here; but life on the island was good for them.”

He led me out to the graveyard and I found that Milo had a store of information gathered from old shipmasters concerning the wild early days of Ichaboe. “There is something queer in the soil of all these guano islands – it preserves bodies just like mummies,” he declared. “Under these wooden crosses are men stabbed to

death, clubbed and shot. You could see their faces today, after sixty, seventy years. Many years ago, there was a sailor working here; and after a storm this mad fellow found some of the graves with the earth torn away by the wind. Every morning he would go to the coffins, and lift up a lid and say; ‘Good morning, Jack – still here? You got a darn sight better shirt than mine. I think I’ll take it.’ He never took a shirt; but one day, after drinking rum from a ship, he went to one of these mummies with a jack-knife and cut off the head and ran into the hut swinging it by the red hair. I tell you, his messmate cleared out pretty quick.”

Many of the ships that came to load guano in the early days were driven ashore in the south-west gales; many relics of these disasters remain. Milo himself lived in a chart-house torn

from the poop of a sailing ship, strengthened against the weather by timbers from other lost ships. There was a cannon outside, half buried, a muzzle-loader of a very old type. On the reefs of the island lie the skeletons of ships; so many of them that even Milo cannot remember their names.

Milo recalls most vividly the period when the ships that came to load guano were all fast schooners from Table Bay. One of them, the Themis, had been a crack yacht in her time and had won a race across the Atlantic. Most famous of all was the Seabird and her master, Captain Garcia; "as tough a sailor man as ever laid canvas on a heeler," they said of him. A little packet with fine lines, she was, and seventy men of the guano and sealing gangs would crowd into her saloon, hold and fo'c'sle. Bearded fellows

with rings in their ears, owning nothing but their mattresses stuffed with sea bird's feathers, sailors to a man. For six months they would work. Then, back in Cape Town, came a great pay day, the seamen's boarding houses would ring with their songs and all the money would go in the fierce brandy they call "Cape smoke." On the island they had lived like Robinson Crusoe's, but for a day they were kings in sailor town.

Now the labourers on Ichaboe are coloured men, and Milo sighed for his old comrades. Some years ago he returned to Italy for a holiday. "My friends were all dead – or gone to America," he said sadly. "People called me 'the man from Africa.' They were all strangers. Everything was different. Perhaps I have wasted my

life on Ichaboe – but now I shall never go back to Italy.”

One thing has never changed on Ichaboe – the bird population. You watch them as you steam up to the island like an enormous swarm of flies hovering over a cake. It is really impossible to count them, but the official estimate is forty millions. Nearly all are gannets, bodies as white as chalk against a blackboard, wings tipped with black, heads and necks like yellow silk, blue beaks, and pale blue eyes. In the southern winter all but the sick and aged birds desert the island. They return in one enormous flight, beating the air into a whirring tumult, as though a squadron of aeroplanes was passing overhead, millions of gannets blotting out the sun until they have settled down on Ichaboe. A great sight, seen by few men besides Milo.

No one knows where they go to make their homes when they leave on the long northward flight. But Milo knew, almost to the day, when instinct would guide them back to the island. Like snow they cover it in the breeding-season. Every inch is packed with their nests. Even a snake could not crawl between them. A gannet eats its own weight in fish every day. Marvellous fishermen they are – you see them dropping from the sky like plummets, wings tightly folded, to emerge a second later with their victims in their beaks.

So Milo watched over the gannets of Ichaboe year after year – the hermit of the South Atlantic. I can hear them now, in the radio of memory, crying their harsh “para! para!” as they dive incessantly in search of fish for themselves and their young. And I see



Gannets (malgas) on a South African guano island.

those rough sea-booted men of the 'forties who drank rum there, and battled like pirates for the treasure of

the island – the men who lie where the gannets roost under the wooden crosses of Ichaboe.

Each winter when the market for sealskins was good, "Mister Milo" took charge of the seal-hunters. They went from island to island, but the richest was a lonely volcanic rock called Hollam's Bird, the most northerly of all. Here, on a pile of stone, basalt and lava, is the home of the seals. Pelts valued at hundreds of thousands of pounds have been won on this lonely spot by licensed seal hunters and by daring poachers. Yet the fur seals still haul up out of the cold ocean year after year; first the great male seals, then the females. Desperately the males fight on the rocks of the islet, while the females watch and go to the victors.

Sealing is a risky trade. Few islands are more inaccessible than Hollam's Bird. The surf breaks all round, there

is no beach. The seal hunters row in with a whale-boat towards one spot at the base of a forty-foot wall of rock where landing is sometimes possible. A man with a rope lashed round his waist jumps for the ledge. If he misses his foothold he is hauled back to the boat. But once on shore he makes the line fast to an iron ring-bolt in the rock, and then the sealers swarm up with their clubs.

Years ago the docile, silky seals waited innocently to be butchered. Now they have grown cunning. They post sentinels to warn them of the coming of the raiders. Their eyesight is poor, but they have a marvellous sense of smell. A female seal, cornered with its young, will turn and fight. If a man shows cowardice, the female will follow him with dangerous jaws snapping viciously. There is no



Stampede of seals on a South African guano island as the author approaches with his camera.

count of the seals that have been clubbed to death on Hollam's Bird, but

there is a long list of men drowned and men killed by the seals they hunted.

The raiders make a determined rush as the seals lie sunning themselves on the flat rocks. Rifles cannot be used – the bullets would damage the valuable skins. So the hunters club right and left mercilessly, with never a pause until their victims are dead and the survivors have found safety in the sea. Great care is taken in removing the pelts for a slip of the knife means a ruined skin. The whale-boat is loaded with pelts; and as the boat, dripping blood, rows back to the ship, sharks follow eagerly in the hope of snatching the skins. Once on board, the skins are salted and stowed away in barrels. A man may earn £400 at sealing in the short season of four months. In the early days the schooner Antarctic took 1,400 seals in one day. But the hunter has always lived dangerously. He may remain on

Hollam's Bird in one of the nameless graves near the landing place.

I heard the other side of the seal-hunting story – the poacher's side – from an old adventurer named Fred Peters, a man who spent years on the desert coast off South-West Africa at the time when the country was a German colony.

“A wonderful coast for poaching,” Fred Peters assured me, passing a gnarled thumb over the chart. “I have knocked down seals all along here, from Hollam's Bird to Roast Beef Island, and come near death doing it. But there were good profits to be had – we did not mind the heavy weather, narrow bunks and hard tack as long as the skins came in.”

A licence cost £25, and a royalty of a shilling a skin had to be paid. There

were certain protected rocks and islands, and other remote places where sealing was allowed. To make rich hauls, many of the sealing crews turned poachers and raided wherever the seals were most plentiful. Three German gunboats – Habicht, Condor and the celebrated Panther of “Agadir incident” fame – guarded the coast. But there were days when a curtain of fog smothered the shore; while even in bright weather a sealing cutter could hide in little inlets and channels between the islands and the beach. At that time, too, there was considerable doubt about territorial rights in those waters. The Cape Government owned the guano islands lying close inshore, while the coast a stone’s-throw away was German. This queer situation offered loopholes in the law, and the

poachers were quick to take advantage of it.

Sometimes small cutters and ketches would sail all the way from Cape Town to raid the sealing rocks. They had no licences – they simply cleared for “fishing” and returned with cargoes of seal-skins. Often the skins were sold at Lobito Bay, where the Portuguese asked no questions. Outside the three-mile limit, of course, seals could be taken by anyone, so that the poachers always had a ready explanation of their valuable freight. But sealing with large mesh nets in the open water is a slow game. These poachers, risked capture, and ran close in to make rich hauls. Again and again armed parties were sent out from Luderitzbucht to arrest them; but nearly always the raiders escaped.

Sudden gales were dreaded by the sealing crews. The work took them into narrow, rocky channels where a cutter might be trapped if the sea came up without warning. That was the fate of the Sea Star.

“I saw it all happen,” said Fred Peters, “The Sea Star was lying at anchor between Steeple Rock and the beach – a favourite haunt of the seals, but one of the most dangerous spots on the coast. A huge sea rushed in, the Sea Star broke adrift, went broadside on to the surf and turned turtle. Six men were drowned – we could not get near them. All they found afterwards was ‘a man’s arm. The sharks are always waiting.’”

The narrowest escape in the career of Fred Peters occurred in the same place. He and six others landed on Steeple Rock one morning and killed a

number of seals. They were skinning the catch when heavy weather blew up. Five men scrambled back to the boat. Peters and another man were marooned on the rock. There is an iron-bolt driven into the summit of Steeple Rock and used by the sealers to make their boats fast. Peters and his companion lashed themselves to the ring-bolt. “Without it, we would have been washed into the sea again and again,” Peters told me. “The sea swept clear across the top of the rock; and there we clung, half drowned and battered, for twelve hours. My Portuguese crew got us off then – a magnificent piece of seamanship.”

Peters made his finest haul of seals on the desolate rock known as Eighty Four. They crept on to the rock at the first crack of dawn, surrounded the sleeping seals, placed men at all the

points where access to the sea was easy, and then gave the signal. "It's murder when you get in among them," says Fred Peters. "We knocked down 1,900 seals that morning, and some of the skins fetched forty-eight shillings each on the London market. That meant about £40 for every man of the crew, and £60 for the fellow who did the 'beaming,' the skilful job of separating the fat from the skins.

"Sealing is not always as easy as that. You have to wait days for a chance ... the sea must be fairly calm and the wind offshore. Seals have poor eyesight, but if you approach them downwind they will smell you a mile away. And once you frighten a herd of seals they grow cunning – you'll be lucky to get within clubbing distance of them."

Mother seals, eighteen months to two years old, provide the most valuable skins, a beautiful brown fur. Older seals are often scratched and cut as a result of fights. It is in the breeding season that the bull seals are dangerous; they have been known to charge a boat when the sealers have attacked their families.

When the young seals have learnt to swim, the herds migrate to deep water. No one knows where they go. They are lean when they return to the rocks of the coast; but in those waters, teeming with fish, they soon recover their fat, sleek appearance. You see them seizing the fish, throwing them up in the air, biting off the tastiest parts as the fish drop, performing exactly like seals on the music-hall stage.

The Ingerid loaded her guano at Ichaboe and steamed on to Mercury Island – a sea-swept rock with a most appropriate name. This black, oblong bird sanctuary has an enormous cavern in its face, and the island contains a maze of tunnels. When the seas rush in, the whole island shakes like quick-silver.

The lonely men who work there for months on end have a neat way of demonstrating this curiosity. They place a full glass of water on the table in their hut; and as the great combers go smashing into the cavern beneath, the water spills over the brim. Windows shiver and doors rattle. An eerie place! “It is impossible to conceive anything more wild and dreary than this isolated spot,” wrote a shipmaster in the old South African sailing directions. “Nothing but the

hope of great profits could induce men to imprison themselves in so wretched a dungeon; a sentence of transportation could certainly not be more severe than the banishment the guano gatherers impose upon themselves.”

One day Mercury Island, eaten away by the sea, must collapse like a sand castle. This great jelly cannot go on shaking for ever. The guano men hope that the end will come when they are not there – familiarity with the peculiar movements of the island has driven anxiety out of their heads. Visitors are rare; but when they do make the difficult landing on Mercury Island they seldom feel safe for a moment.

On the summit of Mercury, 130 feet above the sea, there is a funnel which they call the “Glory Hole.” You can

hear the noisy waters far below if you listen at the edge of the funnel. Undoubtedly it opens into the great east to west cavern. There are many stories of the “Glory Hole”, but no records of exploration. Diamonds are there, they say, and the treasures of those Madagascar pirates who lay in the shelter of the island waiting for the East Indiamen to pass...

Three sailors, bolder than any man within living memory, went down into the “Glory Hole” eighty years ago. They were never seen again. In some dark corridor, lost or trapped by the sea, they must have died of hunger and thirst. So the only treasure ever taken from Mercury is the phosphate wealth of the penguins and gannets. There is no fresh water on the island; the tanks are filled by ships bringing supplies from Cape Town. Fish are easily

caught, however, and there are always unlimited supplies of penguin eggs.

Mercury Island, trembling like a little earthquake, is not the place for a man afraid of solitude. Yet every season, when labourers are recruited in Cape Town, hordes of applicants line up to sign on. There are compensations. The island is wonderfully healthy; it is said that the strong reek of ammonia from the guano prevents colds. The men live there without a doctor, with only a ship’s medicine chest – Friar’s balsam, castor oil and the like – to cure their ailments.

Work goes on from sunrise to sunset. In the evenings old packs of cards are brought out, and the stakes are cigarettes. The music of guitars and banjos mingles with the crying of the birds and the ceaseless beating of the sea. And all the time Mercury Island

rumbles and shakes, a long but perfectly clear warning that one day it will return to the bed of the ocean.

Last of the islands visited by the Ingerid was Possession, kingdom of the penguins and scene of a century-old mystery which, baffles naturalists to this day. A wicked looking island from the sea; glaring white where the guano lies, with black rock and white breakers below. The wrecked coasting steamer Nautilus looms over the southern end of Possession. Beneath the surf lies the sealing ship Auckland, lost with all hands years ago.

Possession, the largest of the guano islands, is only three miles long, and like all the rest it has no fresh water. There was a time when water was brought by schooners, and delay meant danger for the large gang of men on the island. Once, indeed, the

water ran low in the tanks and the thirsty island crowd scanned the horizon in vain for a sail. So one man, to save his comrades, paddled across the strait for two miles to the mainland and trudged towards Luderitzbucht for help. They found him dead on a dune outside the town, recognised him as a guardian of the birds on Possession and guessed his mission. The cutter they sent, loaded with water barrels, reached the island just in time.

After that tragedy the Government erected sun condensers on the island, capable of supplying seventy gallons a week. You can still see them rusting on the shore. Today steamers bring fresh water, and it is stored in tanks holding twelve hundred gallons.

The unsolved mystery of Possession is the covering of sealskins which Captain Morrell found there, many

traces of which are even now to be found beneath the guano. Imagine it – an island clad in fur! “The whole island was literally covered with the carcasses of fur seal, with their skins still on them,” wrote Morrell. “It was evident that they had all met their fate about the same period. I should judge, from the multitude of bones and carcasses, that not less than half a million had perished here at once.”

Morrell suggested that the seals had been overwhelmed and suffocated by one of the hot whirlwinds that sweep out to sea from this desert coast. But the destruction of the seals would have been repeated many times since then if this theory had been correct. Moreover, the seals need only have slipped back to the sea to escape such a menace. No, some other explanation must be sought. It is possible that the

seals fell victims to a plague of which modern science knows nothing. At any rate, seal hair, skeletons and teeth are still dug out of the soil on Possession, almost perfectly preserved by the same chemical which mummifies the bodies of dead seamen on Ichaboe.

From this graveyard of the seals once came diamonds worth a thousand pounds. Is there another tiny island in the world which has produced diamonds? I doubt it. The discovery of diamonds on Possession came about as a result of rich hauls which were being made on the mainland – at that time German territory. One of the theories of the origin of these beautiful stones was that they reached the shore from a “parent rock” on the ocean bed. It seemed possible that there might be diamonds on the British islands, too, and Government officials and prospec-

tors combed the bird sanctuaries for this new source of wealth.

And on Possession, among dozens of worthless crystals, diamonds were found. A thorough search followed. Washing machines, sieves, picks, dynamite and spades were sent to the island. Ovambo native labourers with experience on the German South-West African fields were recruited for the work. A trench three hundred yards long in a bank of gravel and clay, and the all-pervading seal hair, was dug. Within a few weeks the diamonds worth £1,000 were handed over to the Government. Then the enterprise was abandoned. Results had not justified the expense. It was argued that the risk of disturbing the penguins was not worthwhile.

When the Possession Island discoveries became known, however,

a syndicate of eager prospectors in Cape Town planned a daring scheme. With diamonds on the mainland and the island, they argued, there must also be diamonds on the floor of the sea. They would dredge for them, and bring up a richer load than any fisherman had ever hauled. The coasting steamer *Nautilus* was chartered, with all the secrecy appropriate to such a venture, and the prospectors steamed north. I heard the tale from a man who had tried his luck on every African diamond field – Dave Wilson, a tough, sun-browned Scot who sailed in the *Nautilus*.

“We lowered our grab buckets to test the bottom near Possession – inside the three-mile limit,” he recalled wistfully. “Misty weather, it was, just what we had prayed for. A diamond came up in one of the first buckets.

We did not need to test it – we old prospectors knew. And just as we were all crowding round in fine spirits, cheering and slapping each other on the back – just then the sharp bows of a gunboat poked out of the fog.

“There began a game of blind man’s bluff. The gunboat had three times our speed; but the fog was in our favour. A solid white wall shut down between the gunboat and the Nautilus. We should have steamed clean away, but our skipper had forgotten all about Possession Island. The shock as we struck the reef threw us all off our feet. All hands reached the island in the boats. Diamond diggers’ luck, I suppose – I have known worse.”

And there the Nautilus remains, wedged out of reach of the gale-driven combers – a silent memorial to old adventure.

The legends of hidden caches of diamonds on Possession are innumerable. I know of two illicit expeditions in search of hoards which were certainly not based on mere rumour. In the graveyard, one parcel of diamonds was supposed to have been hidden; among the bleached white crosses of decaying wood where the bodies of the captain of the Auckland and his wife were buried when they washed ashore.

I can think of many places where I would rather seek treasure at night than in the graveyard at Possession. They say that the Auckland’s captain and his wife may still be seen standing miserably on the beach near the wreck. Sharks guard the island. The ghost of the woman, they say, has no legs ...

Such is Possession, island of mystery and diamonds.

Southwards with her cargo of guano pitched the Ingerid. One early morning she thrust her bows cautiously through the entrance to Table Bay Docks. In the basin the captain's nerve failed again. He shouted to the mate to let go the anchor. "Steering gear carried away," the captain announced. A helpful tug nosed the Ingerid into her berth.

I was late for the school term. Can you blame me if I faced that last school year with a strong sense of dissatisfaction? At sixteen I had stared round wider horizons, the cries of the sea birds were still in my ears and I was eager to be away again. I need not have worried, but at the time I did not realise that the world would wait for me.

CHAPTER 2

ROYAL AIR FORCE

WHENEVER A war breaks out I find myself loafing round the courtyard of the Castle, military headquarters in Cape Town, an impressive stone fortress built by the Dutch East India Company in the seventeenth century.

It is a show place, but only in wartime do I stand there studying the bastions and cupolas, the massive arches and dungeons. This is because someone is keeping me waiting. I am no great lover of the military atmosphere, but I think it is a mistake to miss a war. As the military net closes tightly round me, I have the consolation of knowing that I have done this myself.

I was eighteen years old the first time, and I was nervous only because I feared the doctor would not pass me.

The medical examination of the Royal Flying Corps was severe, and I was tall and thin and without any muscles worth mentioning. But I felt it would be a tragedy to be left behind. I was not particularly interested in flying. The navy would have taken me as an ordinary seaman R.N.V.R., but they could give me no assurance that I would be sent to a theatre of war. Reluctantly I put the sea behind me and turned to the unfamiliar air.

The doctor turned me down. "Insufficient chest development," he said. I bought a chest expander, and returned a fortnight later. But it was not the exercise which passed me into the Royal Flying Corps – it was the word spoken in the doctor's ear.

Many of my school friends had joined at the same time, early in 1918, and cheerfully we marched down to the

old Union Castle liner Walmer Castle and embarked for England. One lad in the draft, I remember, was only fifteen, but he had added three years to his age and bluffed everyone successfully. (I often wondered what had happened to him, until I met him again in 1942, serving in the Middle East.) The voyage lasted six weeks – weeks of drill and lifeboat drill, with long hours spent on the boat deck looking out for submarines which never appeared. Ten weary, sweltering days we lay at anchor in the bay off Freetown, Sierra Leone, while a large convoy assembled. I know nothing more tantalising than lying off a new country with all shore leave forbidden. We carried out an “abandon ship” practice while the liner waited on the calm water of the bay. Twenty minutes after the alarm, the last boat pulled

away from the ship. I thought we would be lucky to get twenty minutes in the submarine zone.

Watches were doubled as we steamed on towards England, and many a freezing night I stood for hours, staring into the darkness with a whistle in my hand, a blanket round my body and a lifejacket over everything. Destroyers, some of them towing “blimps,” circled round the convoy. We made Plymouth safely. For some days there had been a cigarette famine on board the Walmer Castle. The draft rushed the tobacco stall at the railway station, only to find the stock limited to one brand of scented cigarettes. There were shortages in that war, too, and to such depths had the Plymouth railway station sunk. The train for London must have seemed to

onlookers to be filled with bronzed but perfumed, effeminate young men.

By this time the Royal Flying Corps had become the Royal Air Force, with a huge reception depot in Fitzjohn's Avenue, Hampstead. There all of us discovered for the first time that famous military institution, the "Army Promise." We had been told that on arrival we would draw our pay for the voyage, at the third class air mechanic's rate of one shilling and sixpence a day. Then we could all go off on a fortnight's leave.

There was no pay. It appeared that we were not in the Royal Air Force at all until we attested at the reception depot. As for the drilling and discipline on board ship ... well, that was good for us. And there was no leave. We spent the fortnight going through the whole flying medical

examination again, drilling on the heath, receiving uniform, being vaccinated, and waiting in the avenue for this and that. My heavy ammunition boots raised blisters. I began to be sorry I had not gone to sea instead.

Meals were served in the great hall of a former conservatorium of music. Coming from a land of plenty, we did not relish those meals. At first there were no knives or forks, and I remember spreading margarine on war bread with a sausage. Almost daily a medical officer lectured us from the platform against the girls who walked Fitzjohn's Avenue. We felt that the rations were more dangerous to our health than the girls. The cooks sold small cakes at mealtimes; and at last someone detected the swindle. The cooks were selling us our own rations!

However, you cannot have a war without the under-nourishment of the troops in one way or another. "Any complaints? No!"

One night there was an air raid. Eighteen Gotha's came over, the searchlights went up, a bomb fell a mile away and shrapnel pattered down on Fitzjohn's Avenue. The South Africans treated it as a fireworks display, and sat in the windows pointing out the sights. (More than twenty years afterwards I was to watch air raids on the outskirts of Cairo in just the same way. They were displays without danger.)

Then we were all sent off to Hastings. For three months we drilled, and burnished our bayonets, pipe-clayed our white belts, polished our buttons, cleaned our rifles. No flying, not even a glimpse of an aeroplane, except in

the sky. The first great wave of the influenza epidemic passed over England, and we lay aching and groaning on our hard beds, running high temperatures. The medical officer entered the room in which I lay helpless with three others. "Ha!" exclaimed the M.O., turning to his orderly, "we seem to have come into a bloody girls' school." It was nothing less than a deadly plague which held us in its grip, but to the military mind of that doctor we were malingerers, deserving only contempt. This attitude is another feature of all wars and I can see no hope of reformation. No attempt was made to treat us. Many of the South Africans had served previously in the East African campaign, and were liable to sudden attacks of malaria. The ignorance of the English army doctors when faced

with malaria was pathetic. Some of them had never seen a case before. The boys treated each other.

Rations in those days consisted largely of rabbit, rice, fish and rhubarb. I still eat fish, but I formed a lasting dislike for the other items. At one camp, however, we were consoled by a list of menus put up on the door of the mess, and showing that on Mondays we received eggs and bacon for breakfast, roast beef for dinner on Tuesdays, and so on. This was pure fiction. Such food was never served, but the menus were greatly admired by distinguished visitors.

Denham in Buckinghamshire was the next stage in the course. Denham was a school of aeronautics. At last we smelt the sharp odour of castrol, learnt to swing a propeller, listened to lectures on the theory of flight, aerial

navigation, wireless, and rigging. There was even an ancient biplane, with much of the fabric stripped from the lower wings, on which we could taxi about the football field. One cadet, who had been a pilot in France and had fallen into some sort of disgrace, was going through the whole course again as a punishment. Something must have snapped in his brain one day, for he opened the old biplane full out, got her off the ground, staggered crazily over the camp, and crashed in a field. They repaired the wreck and then tore off so much fabric that the finest pilot alive could not have flown her.

Among the instructors at Denham was the famous racing motorist, Malcolm Campbell. (I met him again, as I shall relate, when he brought his Bluebird to South Africa to race at Verneuk Pan.)

One day I appeared before Campbell to be cross-examined on aero engines. I was not born with a spanner in my hand, I never peer beneath the bonnet of my car; in fact, I do not want to know about engines. At written examinations it was my custom to sit behind a bright lad who would hold up his paper from time to time so that I could discover the answers. But here was a crisis, and I was about to be unmasked. There was, in that heroic period of flying, an engine so ingenious that the cylinders rotated while the crankshaft remained stationary. Campbell soon discovered my ignorance of this devilish machine. He shook his head and I had failed. This trivial incident had its sequel many years later, as you will find elsewhere in my description of the Verneuk Pan affair.

Among the cadets at Denham was a man who had served before the war as a regular soldier. In fact, he had been a private in the Coldstream Guards. Cadets were allowed to wear officer's pattern uniform when "walking out"; and this man, who had never before imagined himself garbed as an officer, decided to cycle over to Windsor and display his new splendour to old friends in the Guards. He had no bicycle of his own, so he took one belonging to a military policeman. He was away for two days, and on his return he was confined to barracks and given extra duties. One evening he was scrubbing the floor of the officers' mess when he observed that a bottle of whisky had not been locked away. When the officers trooped in to dinner that night our friend was lying under the table in drunken slumber. We

never saw him again. It had been decided that he would not make a good officer, and I suppose the tailor who made his officer's uniform is still waiting for payment.

Great importance was attached to sport at Denham and it was compulsory. I knew how to sail a boat, but that was useless in the pleasant English countryside. Some villain told me that I could obey the order by watching the boxing. I thought this was a good way out of the difficulty, and sat fascinated while my friends were knocked about the ring by a sergeant who had been a professional prize-fighter. All went well until the "pro" looked round for a new victim, pointed to a cadet next to me, and called gruffly: "You next!" It was a narrow squeak, and I never watched the boxing again. Instead I joined the cross-country runners,

dropped out early when we reached bushes, rested there until the weary pack returned past my hiding-place, and then went panting back to camp with them. I took great care not to come first.

Many a happy week-end did I spend in London at that period, all unknown to the authorities. My bed-boards and blankets were hidden by my friends. The orderly sergeant would come round and bellow: "Stand to your cots!" no one seemed to be missing, and this simple trick succeeded again and again. Thus I was able to see "Chu Chin Chow," "The Bing Boys on Broadway," and other memorable entertainments.

On the parade ground life was often grim for me. The light growth which appeared on my face at the age of eighteen needed shaving only once or

twice a week. But once there was an inspection by our colonel, an English nobleman, who gazed closely at my youthful cheeks, and inquired: “Did you shave this morning?”

The correct army answer to this familiar question is always a smart: “Yes, sir!” The inspecting officer is then left slightly baffled. He can tell you that you did not make a very good job of it, but that bounces off.

Childishly I answered: “No, Sir.” The colonel had his say in gentlemanly fashion. Other officers followed, adding their comments. Last of all came a sergeant-major of the old school. He scrutinised the light downy growth sorrowfully and then I heard his deep, growling voice:

“Be a man – ’ave a scrape!”

At the end of the course I was told that owing to my failure in aero-engines I would have to go through the whole business again. This did not suit me. I wanted to be an officer with more money and more freedom. Boldly I requested an interview with the commanding officer. I pointed out that I had failed in only one subject, and that I would remedy that defect at the first opportunity. I finished with a simple appeal to his patriotism. “I don’t want to be left behind, sir – I want to get to France.”

Apparently the request was so unusual that I went off with a pat on the back while all the other failures remained at Denham.

Uxbridge followed, a month on machine-guns and bombs. Here again I had to use my wits, but the officer who examined me wore a South

African War ribbon, and I had no difficulty in persuading him to talk to me of his experiences in South Africa, rather than my faulty knowledge of the Vickers gun. I was then gazetted as a second lieutenant, Royal Air Force; for it was before the days of the weird new ranks which some lunatic invented with the idea of making the R.A.F. different from the other services.

Up to this time, of course, not one of us had been into the air. I was posted to a training squadron at Netheravon on Salisbury Plain, drew my flying kit and looked round for an opportunity to fly. No one showed any great interest in me at first, for long delays are inseparable from any form of military training.

Soon after my arrival, however, I saw a Handley Page warming its twin

engines on the aerodrome. There was a lone figure in the pilot's cockpit and the rear-gunner's seat was empty.

I pointed to the empty seat, and the pilot nodded ... a little hesitantly, I thought, but I pulled on my leather coat and helmet and climbed in. The engines opened out, the old Handley bumped over the grass and lurched into the air at last, over the cavalry school at the foot of the hill, over the cemetery with its propeller blades marking the graves of airmen, away across the bleak plain. I wondered whether the tail was meant to shake so violently, but there was no one to ask.

Fog drifted over the neighbouring aerodrome of Amesbury as we landed, and before the wheels stopped there was a thick white blanket round us. We left the Handley on the aerodrome and walked over to the mess to find

some other way of returning to Netheravon. As the pilot took off his flying coat I noticed something missing.

“You’re not wearing your wings,” I pointed out.

“Oh, no, I haven’t got my wings yet,” he replied. “I’m a pupil the same as you are. This is the first time I’ve flown a Handley.”

I thought of the fog as we landed, and felt thankful for my ignorance.

An instructor named Montgomery took charge of me, and this officer showed far greater confidence in my ability than I myself possessed. I could never hear what he was saying through the voice-pipe, but after a time I found that I could trim the machine by the horizon and keep the fool-proof Avro tolerably straight and level. Often

when I had the controls Montgomery would haul himself up by the centre-section struts and sit with his legs dangling over the side. I may have given him a terror-stricken smile when he looked back and waved; but it was a forced smile. Parachutes were never used in those days, and I lived in fear lest Montgomery should fall overboard and I should have to land without his expert guidance.

Flying discipline was almost non-existent at that period, and young pilots carried out crazy feats which even a modern air circus pilot would hesitate to perform. One daredevil flew right through a hangar. Another tried to loop a Handley Page, but mercifully discovered that the lumbering ‘bus was incapable of the manoeuvre. The armistice put an end to a great deal of lunacy, and new

work had to be devised on the ground to keep the horde of flying officers and pupils occupied.

Before long there were only Canadians and South Africans left at Netheravon, all awaiting repatriation. There was still a number of German prisoners of war employed about the aerodrome making roads. Owing to lack of other work, the Canadians and South Africans were also given healthy exercise out of doors breaking up aeroplanes, demolishing hangars and so on. An enterprising Canadian posed a photograph which made it appear that Canadians and German prisoners were working in the same labour gangs. The picture was sent off to the Canadian High Commissioner in London with a letter of protest. A few days later a committee of investigation landed at Netheravon, and more

suitable ways of killing time were found for us. I learnt to drive a motor-car, while other more studious young men attended classes in mathematics and languages. For a fortnight I was escort to an officer awaiting court-martial. We worked hard preparing a plausible defence, and he was acquitted. Often I was away in London for a week at a time without authority being aware of my absence.

Only about the middle of 1919 was I sent back to South Africa on board the intermediate liner Guildford Castle. I received a gratuity of £80, and later a service medal – handsome rewards, I thought, for such an undistinguished career. Many old friends were on board the Guildford, and I was happy to be returning home. The First Great War had been kind to me. I was prepared to overlook the rabbit and

rhubarb, and such remarks as: “Be a man – ’ave a scrape.”

In command of the six hundred officers on board the Guildford was the late Colonel Denys Reitz, famous author of “Commando” and other memorable works. The war was over and it was not easy to preserve even a semblance of discipline. The ship called early one morning at Funchal, Madeira. I followed a cavalcade of officers through the cobbled streets and into a building which, I then discovered, was less respectable than it appeared from the outside. Although breakfast had not yet been served, a great deal of wine was being drunk and there was dancing. The conduct of some of my comrades while returning to the ship became riotous. They crossed swords with the local gendarmerie, and by the time I reached

the jetty a battle was being fought along the waterfront. Steam pinnaces were waiting to take us off. A fusillade of stones from the excited Portuguese followed us into the boats. We replied with lumps of coal.

The lovely terraces of Madeira faded astern, and the ship was transformed into a gambling hell. Certain far-sighted officers had brought on board with them such games as roulette, crown and anchor, minoru and “house.” One South African captain wearing the proud uniform of a Guards regiment unbuttoned his tunic, sat down on the deck with a crown and anchor board between his legs, and uttered the time-honoured patter of the game: “If you don’t speculate, you can’t accumulate ... lay it on thick and heavy ... come here in a wheel-barrow and go away in a motorcar ... up she

risers, and the old man spits blood again!"

Fortunately I had drawn only half my gratuity. I lost all that I had with me, and sat with my bankrupt friends in the tropics without the price of a drink between us. We watched the son of a South African millionaire win five hundred pounds at crown and anchor within thirty minutes. I sold my British warm, but the luck did not change. One of my friends had a case of crockery in the baggage-room – he intended to get married soon after his arrival. I never heard whether the marriage took place, but I do know that he got his crockery up on deck, sold it by auction and promptly lost the proceeds on the roulette table.

Desperately we entered one of our circle for the series of boxing contests held on board, with cash prizes. He

stood up magnificently to tremendous punishment, but lost on points. I was glad to see my parents on the quay when the Guildford Castle docked at Cape Town. Penniless I had returned.

CHAPTER 3

FLYING, FISHING AND WHALING

FINDING SOMETHING to do after the First Great War gave me a headache. I knew what I wanted – a life of constant change which would take me to the far corners of the globe. Journalism, into which I drifted, was a poor substitute for my nineteen-year-old dreams; but it was the best I could do. I must put journalism in the right perspective for all those who imagine that their troubles would be over if only they could find a job on a newspaper.

With the aid of a newspaper I have moved round considerably, but I have gone much further on my own savings. Anyone who thinks that a newspaper is the gateway to adventure will find the odds about twenty to one against him. The odds are longer in many

other trades and so, to that extent, journalism does offer a sporting chance.

The rank amateur seeking a start on a newspaper usually assumes a refined air and tells the editor that he would like to tackle book reviewing and dramatic criticism. This blunder is fatal. But any young man who walked in declaring that he was a fast shorthand writer and would like to be given a chance in the police courts would receive a sympathetic hearing. That is where the beginner starts anyway – in the crude, evil-smelling, busy police courts. For months I saw human nature at its worst, and I learnt not to believe all I was told. One anecdote only, and I shall pass on to sweeter air.

Vagrants, the very dregs of Cape Town, came before the courts every day. It is difficult to make a vagrant

understand his villainy, but the Irish police sergeant who prosecuted had reduced it to a formula.

“Now, boy,” he would explain, “ye’re charged wid bein’ a vagrant. Ye’ve got no home, no friends, no money, no hope – what do ye say, boy, guilty or not guilty?”

A journalist should have specialised knowledge of one or two popular subjects. Then, if he is a resourceful journalist, he will come to be regarded as an authority on those subjects and escape from the police courts. I had a smattering of information about flying, so that very soon I found myself in the air again.

Two brothers, Frank and Shirley Solomon, having served in the Royal Air Force as pilots, brought two aeroplanes back to Cape Town with

them after the war. They had picked them up cheap-D.H. 6’s, they were, known in the service as “Crabs.” Those two brothers set up in the civil aviation business at the end of 1919 and kept it going at a profit for more than three years. Nowadays you may not realise just how great was their achievement. Ask someone who knew the old flying days, and you will learn.

They carried thousands of passengers, including many people who had never seen an aeroplane before. All over the Cape Province they flew as pioneers, until they came to places so remote that the coloured folk ran in terror at the sight of them. They sold aerial photographs. Once they flew out to sea trying to spot whales for a whaling company.

I was much more to those brothers than a reporter who described their

flights. At times I was the firm's ground manager, and always I handled the publicity for them. One day in 1921 we flew across Table Bay and made history by landing on the beach at Robben Island. The island, at that time, was a leper and convict settlement. We gave the resident Commissioner a free ride, but the warders and nurses paid a pound a head. Meanwhile I was interviewing the medical superintendent on a new leprosy treatment. The tide came up and we had to take off in a hurry, but Frank Solomon had £50 in his pocket as a result of the enterprise.

Another flight the following year was not so successful. It was a public holiday, and Frank had decided to land on the golf-course at Somerset Strand in search of passengers. An inexperienced mechanic had served

the machine that day; he had filled the small gravity tank, but had overlooked the pressure tank. Of this, happily, we were unaware when the old, weather-beaten "Crab" climbed aloft and steered round the shore of False Bay. The guilty mechanic came with us.

Over the golf-course Frank circled. There were cattle in the way, and large ant-heaps had risen since his last visit. Frank decided to turn back for home. At this moment, with only two hundred feet of height, the engine coughed and gave up. Frank switched over to the pressure tank even as he put the nose down; but there was no response. I saw masses of greenery rising to meet us, and jerked off my straps. "Hold tight!" shouted Frank. Next moment I was catapulted out of my seat, through all the wires of that old-fashioned biplane, to land on the

lower main plane with all my breath knocked out. I had put my nose through the fabric. The other two, who had kept their straps on, remained in the machine. When they saw that I was all right, the reaction set in and they laughed. I still marvel that my head was not cut off by all those wires. We had crashed down on a small tree and the trunk had come up beneath my seat. Since that day I have had bad moments in mid-air, but all my landings have been happy ones.

As a young reporter, I covered the familiar Table Bay Docks for a long period, and I have never become too important or too bored to go out on a good shipping story.

The material I gathered there has been invaluable. When I turned to fiction, I found that I had all the characters I

needed for tales of the sea. But I was never content to write everything at second-hand. The newspaper had a large magazine section; and this provided a sound argument in favour of many a voyage. I went out in trawlers and whalers. Twice, as I shall relate, I visited Tristan da Cunha in cruisers on the Royal Navy.

I still think the trawler men of the Cape of Good Hope are amongst the hardest workers in the world. You can tell a trawler by her bows – high-flaring, to crush down the seas, by her stout wheelhouse, enormous winch, and high funnel. And you can tell a trawler man by his hands, by the dirty, sodden wisps of bandage he wears. Fingers are swollen, with cracked and jagged nails. Palms are cut and calloused and scored by interminable grappling with coarse nets. Sometimes



Tristan da Cunha islanders in one of their canvas boats arrive alongside a visiting cruiser. This picture was taken by the author in 1923, when H. M. S. Dublin called.

a sharp fin drives into the flesh. There are mad moments on the Agulhas

Bank when serious hurt goes unnoticed for a time. These men often

work twenty hours a day in sun and wind and rain and the icy whiplash of winter spray by night; always in that severity of motion which only small craft in gale-tumbled sea can achieve. Only the very fittest survive the challenge of the Cape fishing grounds.

“You must start as a boy,” a tired-eyed skipper told me one day, up in the wheelhouse. He swayed as he spoke, and a smothering wall of freezing sea crashed green and solid over the rail. On the foredeck men shook salt water from their oilskins, wiped salt water from their beards, fumbled with their capacious jerseys, and went on gutting the catch. “If he does not start young, he soon leaves the trawlers,” said the skipper; “it is too hard.” He sighed at the vanishing land.

But they are philosophers all, these trawler men. More fish, more money –

that is their creed at sea. Week after week they clatter about the same iron decks, longing for that one day in seven on which they see their homes. Experience far surpassing expertness with charts guides them to the hidden banks where the sole and stockfish swarm.

Clamber over tugs, lighters, and small craft to the rust streaked bulwarks of the James Pitchers, typical of the Cape Town trawling fleet. She came from the Tyne under her own steam, this seventy-five tonner. Sturdy and compact, she could keep the seas in a typhoon. Carrots and cabbages protrude from a box above the “doctor’s” domain, and a wisp of steam from the galley funnel carries the odour of pea soup. In the stern, a large freshwater tank. The decks are littered with fishing gear, and lashed

port and starboard are the nets, glistening with tar. Eight bells! The James Pitchers steams past the clock tower.

On a dawn-tinged circle of lonely ocean the work began, under the grey, inverted bowl of the sky, with white-crested hills and snouted rollers for company. Only a few score miles from a great seaport, but it might have been thousands, for land was hidden under the swinging line of the horizon. And here we lurched and pitched and staggered for six weary days.

The skipper comes from his little sea-cabin beneath the wheelhouse. He sniffs, turns his seamed, brown face to wind'ard, and appears to approve the signs. We shoot the trawl. A complicated affair this net, towed by wire hawsers along the sea-floor with its mouth held open by two great slabs

of weighted timber, sweeping all fish that it encounters into the narrow "cod-end," or purse. From there escape is impossible unless the net breaks under the strain of many tons.

Hundreds of screaming birds whirled slowly above the ship. They knew what was coming. Slowly the wire cables crept round the winch drums, tenderly the brawny Bo 'sun worked the controls. The clatter was louder than the cries of the birds. From the wheelhouse I watched the reaping of the sea harvest.

The net broke surface, and anxiously the "deckies" gazed at the bulging bag. More fish, more money. "Five tons," guessed a man on deck, and with a satisfied air the crew went on with the work. Up came two heavy trawl boards, reaching with a thud the "gallows" that hold them to the ship's

side. The net came closer, so that we could see the smaller fish, little heads with eyes a-goggle sticking through the meshes. Below them, the dull gleam of pink and silver, lifting and sinking with the swell.

A tricky business, this hoisting the net aboard. Tons of fish may sweep through a weak part at any moment. All the trawler man's craft is needed now. The catch was far too large to haul on deck in one great bunch; so down in the waist the hands leaned over side, striving with aching wrists to pass a rope around the "cod-end" to divide the weight. I can see them now, that struggling line of men in glistening oilskins, all oblivious of the heavy rolling of the ship. Each man strained to get a fair grip on the net. Someone hitched a line under the bag at last, and, gasping, the men

straightened. One weary fellow's cheek was gashed; he smeared his face for a moment with his oilskin coat and went on with the job. A man slithered across the deck with a hook and heaving line, and again the rattle of the winch was heard. Then came the mightiest thrill of trawling, the most spectacular event, the arrival of the fish on board.

The net swung gently over the rail, bulky with hundreds of fish, streaming salt water. The winch was suddenly silent, and for a few seconds the Bo'sun fumbled with the draw-rope to release the weight poised above his head. Nimbly he sprang aside. With a noise like a long-drawn sigh the fish covered the deck. A great sight! We had seen the dark mass of the net, little cubes of colour between the meshes. Then in a second the decks were

transformed. Radiant, blazing, shimmering fish wiped out every touch of drabness.

The trawler men were not impressed. Many fish had to be cleaned and sent below ... and more fish caught. There is something endless about the trawler man's task. To sort, clean, and pack five tons of fish is only possible with system and long practice. The net had hardly disgorged its load before the work began. Six men jumped knee-deep into the living mass. From aft the cabin boy came to help. From the wheelhouse came the skipper, to work harder than his men. They toiled desperately to sort that catch delving into heaps of the sea's miscellany with shovels, picking out the good fish, throwing the rubbish over side. They disposed of hideous things, the

sucking arms of the octopus, the flat white fish with huge blind eyes.

In an hour the fish were ready for gutting. There was no rest between; no pause because the ship battered through a head sea with spray lashing the fore-deck. Work, grim work, without grumble or complaint. Boards were placed on the rail, sloping to the deck, on which to clean the fish. At the lower end of each board stood a round basket. First the fish are thrown into a basket, to be grabbed by a man who cuts off the heads with a long keen knife and passes the bodies to his mate. The second man merely slits the belly; a third man guts the fish with a careless motion of the hand. Entrails drop over the side, and are seized instantly by clamouring gulls.

Cleaning may begin at sunset. The last drag of the day may bring up several

tons. Then all hands eat their supper where they stand – mugs of tea and sandwiches. A flare blazes on the derrick, giving a ghostly light to the labour. At midnight, perhaps, the work is finished. Then they will eat a proper meal.

When every fish has been cleaned the washing starts. A hose floods the round baskets; and quickly they are passed down the hatchway into the neat white-painted ice-room. Sometimes one catch has not been cleaned before it is time to haul another “drag.” Only one thing makes the trawler man see the job through – more fish, more money.

There came at last a morning, crystal-clear, when the trawler quivered as she raced for harbour. Gone was the dead weight of the net. We were a happy company upon a free, homeward-

bound ship. There entered into our minds a great weariness of the sea which had battered us relentlessly for six days. Hungrily we smelt the land and quickly we scrambled into our shore-going clothes.

“Forty tons,” bawled the skipper as we warped alongside. I observed the satisfaction of a sleek gentleman on the quay, the first link with the world to which we had returned. And I glanced into the silent wheelhouse. The telegraph still registered the skipper’s last command: “Finished with engines.”

Twice I went out with the Norwegian whalers – a far livelier and more exciting game than the drudgery of trawling.

In Norway the best brains of the family, not the fools, are sent to sea.

There are fine characters among the gunners in the whaling fleet, and I met one outstanding man. He was Captain Morch Olsen, a graduate of Oslo University, author, journalist and a great killer of whales. Years ago he sailed from Norway with the first expedition to South Georgia; and he described to me his feelings as his ship crawled nervously between ice-covered headlands into Antarctic harbours which no human being had entered before. They built their shore stations beneath the rainbow splendour of the Aurora Australis.

Morch Olsen wrote an expert treatise on whales, putting forward his theory that the seas of the world contain more whales than the fleets of catchers will kill in a century. He believed that somewhere in the Antarctic, where no man has yet penetrated, there are

immense herds of right whales, the species which some scientists regard as extinct. Olsen once found a job as waterfront reporter on an Oslo newspaper. He wrote from the seaman's point of view; but they cut his copy in the office and he showed his displeasure by going back to sea. "A pity", he remarked, shrugging his muscular shoulders. "It is nice to have a little flat in the city, to eat your meals at a table which does not swing incessantly, where the plates stand still and the milk is fresh." He looked round the bleak walls of the charthouse, glanced at the barometer, and uttered with a laugh the phrase which summed up his life afloat. "Here there is positively no comfort."

Morch Olsen fired his last harpoon some years before the Second Great War. He came from the Antarctic

(where first-class gunners were earning £5,000 in a season) and the sudden change from the cold to warmer latitudes was too much even for his great frame. His book was published after his death.

I see him now, black oilskins dripping salt water, swaying to the lurch of the whaler at his Svend Foyn gun in the bows. The figure of a Viking hero. Across the dawn sky swung the masthead barrel whence a seaman scanned the waters.

Whalers are surely the most unstable of all ships. Built without keels that they may turn quickly during the chase, they have a peculiar movement in heavy weather, an unbearable twist, a startling roll, an unnerving pitch. We had steamed far out to sea, and now we thrashed our way towards the distant shore. Dirty weather, for some

unexplained reason, drives whales near the land. We were after them. A yacht would have ridden the grey seas lightly, steadied by her canvas, wetted only by the spray. The blunt-nosed whaler dived into each spume-filled valley, lifting many a comber over the Svend Foyn gun. The rigging was shrill with the voice of the gale. Strong winds clawed at one in unsheltered places. I lay down in the charthouse. The hours passed.

“Whale, whale!” shouted Olsen hoarsely in my ear. I groped on to the bridge, miserably enough, and watched him hurrying for’ard, grunting his satisfaction. The ship slackened speed. Whales have an astonishing sense of hearing and they must grow used to the noise of our engines before we approach to kill. We saw streams of breath when the

whale blew; the swirl on the surface as the whale dived; and sometimes a light mass beneath the surface guided the man in the masthead barrel. Olsen still hovered near his gun, watching and directing. There came a sensational moment when the leviathan rose in full view of the watchers on the ship; rose and exposed a streaming backbone and a wall of flesh. The harpoon gun broke its silence, vomiting a flash of light. Harpoon and rope streaked towards the whale. Oilskin-clothed men, who had known a thousand moments such as this, gasped again.

In a few seconds the whale had coughed out its life. It was hauled alongside. And now a great hypodermic syringe was thrust through the blubber, and compressed air made it grotesque and balloon-like.

Captain Olsen wrenched the telegraph to “full ahead,” the mate spun the wheel hard over, and we were homeward bound for Saldanha.

Norwegians do not shout “There she blows” from the masthead barrel when they sight a whale. They cry “Bla-a-a-ast!” If ever there was romance in a shout it is in that long-drawn warning of the modern Vikings who hunt whale off the South African coast. Once I spent a week at the Saldanha whaling station. When the hooter sounded, a crowd of huge men in grease-stained overalls would come into the mess room to eat their sweet Norwegian soup, their fried fish and cheese. Silent men, they were. When they talked it was always of whales – of humpbacks, blue whales, finners and sperm. Yet they were not without their streak of poetry. They told me

the legend of the harpooned sperm whale which always turns towards the sun in its death flurry.

From these men, too, I heard the story of a strange whaling accident. One of the chasers from Saldanha Bay had captured a whale; and, as usual, the crew searched for the harpoon to extract it before taking the whale in tow alongside the ship. They could not find the harpoon, so they passed chains round the monster's tail and steamed away towards the station. During the passage an engineer rushed on deck with the news that the ship was making water. Soon the stokehold was flooded – pumps could not cope with it. The harpoon protruding from the dead whale had battered a hole in the steel plates below the water-line. The men escaped in the boats; ship and whale were lost.

On the broad slipway at the whaling station I saw a whale torn to pieces in an hour, to vanish into the boilers. One man with a flensing knife slit the lower jaw, stepped into the dark cavity and ripped out the tongue. Bloated whales, filled with compressed air, thrust grooved, barnacled bellies from the water, waiting their turn. The strips of blubber came off them like banana peel.

It is hard work on a whaling station when large catches are made. Decayed whales give poor oil. The hands work in watches, right round the clock, to keep the pots boiling.

Another of my Norwegian friends had the supreme good fortune to bring in a sperm whale in which a huge lump of ambergris was found. Whales eat cuttlefish; this diet causes irritation and the valuable ambergris is

sometimes produced as a result. There is no need to envy a sweepstake winner if you can lay hands on this grey spongy substance. The market price varies between £5 and £10 an ounce.

I was entering Cape Town's leading restaurant one evening when a loud voice hailed me across the palm court – a voice with the sing-song Norwegian accent. "You know dot whale dey found der ambergris in?" inquired the voice. "Dot vos my whale!" And there were the gunner and his ship's company celebrating it. The Norwegians are magnificent drinkers. Beware their fiery aquavit.

CHAPTER 4

UNDER SAIL

SOME OF my finest days were spent under sail. They were spread over many years, but because I was young when I started, I think this is the right place to give you another breath of sea air and a glimpse of the men who go sailing and do not call themselves yachtsmen.

A yachtsman is a chap with a blue reefer jacket, often brassbound, and white flannels, and a paid crew to see that he does not run into trouble. Sailing men dress disreputably and do everything themselves. Any young man living by the sea who finds life futile after the war through lack of a pastime might consider sailing as a means of salvation. Even an owner will agree that it costs less than motoring. Members of a crew do not

feel the expense at all. And it is the healthiest and most satisfactory game on the surface of the globe.

For many years I sailed with the most brilliant criminal lawyer of his day in South Africa. His name was Beauclerk Upington, his cutter was the *Innisfallen*, built by Dickie in 1910 on the Clyde. We called him "the Skipper." A great man, with a ship to match his own strong character.

The Skipper, as far as I know, had no enemies, but he was openly hostile towards what he called the "smug crowd." Members of his crew soon learnt to recognise these people, for the Skipper often denounced them publicly when he dined hilariously in town after a hard day's sailing. The "smug crowd" included all the pompous people, the hypocrites, those who regarded position as more

important than the really human qualities; those who were affected in speech or manner. I shall never forget the consternation at a Royal Cape Yacht Club meeting at which an influential local potentate had been invited to preside. His speech was a remarkably stupid effort, and Advocate Upington, K.C., a compelling speaker, of course, was next on the list. He referred to the potentate as "that pompous old swine in the chair."

Young men who sailed with the Skipper learnt more than seamanship. They learnt to make friends in pubs. The Skipper was a penetrating and unflinching judge of character. He had been a Member of Parliament, his fees were large when he chose to work, his reputation at the Bar was unassailable. But he could mix with naval ratings,

ship's firemen, fishermen, the humblest of men, gain their respect immediately and show that he understood them. A rare gift, but the Skipper was an unusual man.

In a waterfront pub one day we met a ship's carpenter who told us that he was working on shore as a builder.

"What's your name?" inquired the Skipper.

"If I told you my name, you would not believe me." The carpenter then produced a tattered merchant seaman's discharge book and showed us his name. It was Wildgoose.

"A glass of beer with you, Wildgoose," said the Skipper. "Will you give me a job if I turn up on Monday morning?"

“Aye – I want a tall chap for carrying planks”

“Now,” went on the Skipper, “what would you take us for?” Wildgoose looked at the tall, lean, grey-headed Skipper, he glanced at the crew, and he summed us up.

“I should say you came orf a ship.”

The Skipper was pleased. “What sort of ship?” he asked.

“One of them emigrant ships bound for Orstrylia,” replied Wildgoose decisively.

At sea the Skipper was superb. Innisfallen was, in my opinion, a little over-canvassed for the fierce winds of Cape waters. (It is easy to start an argument among sailing men, but I think so.) The Skipper always drove her; yet when he took the tiller she

became docile, and fewer seas broke over her decks. As he went below he would give his orders in the form of a quotation from a poem he had read somewhere: “Don’t you take no sail off her, mister.” And under her great mainsail “LF.” would surge on through the night.

Len Crowder, one of my old R.A.F. friends, was at the tiller one day when a heavy squall struck the Innisfallen. Instead of luffing, Len sat as though paralysed with the tiller pulled well in to his stomach. She heeled until three deck planks were covered; and the Skipper came up out of his bunk in a hurry.

“That’s the way to capsize a ship, Len,” remonstrated the Skipper.

“I thought you said she was fool proof, Skipper.”

“Yes, my boy, she is – but not bloody lunatic proof!” Among the crew just after the First Great War was one Andre Steytler, a man of splendid physique and a great sense of humour. He was a clerk in the pay department of the South African Railways, a position which did not carry a high salary. Andre lived austere; for a year or two at a time he would not drink or smoke, but he saved for a purpose. At intervals of a few years he would book a first-class passage in the mail boat and make for Paris. While his money lasted he lived royally. Someone who knew him in Cape Town spotted him at the Cafe de la Paix. Andre was wearing a black hat, and he had an aperitif before him.

“What are you doing here, Andre?” asked the visitor.

“Studying art,” declared Andre firmly. He made many such trips, and would probably be saving (or spending in Paris) now if the Second Great War had not broken out. Andre, an old soldier, joined up at once. He did not seek a commission, but became a private in the infantry again, carrying his pack through Abyssinia and the Western Desert and Italy at the age of forty-five.

Andre Steytler sold me my first boat, the Amitia, a little yawl which had been brought out from Canada by a relative, and which he had acquired cheaply. I used to keep her in Table Bay Docks. One day in 1924 another yawl sailed in and moored in the next berth: She was the Islander of Los Angeles, and her owner was Harry Pidgeon, one man who had solved the secret of life. Pidgeon was then sailing

around the world alone for the first time. In 1936 he was back again, and he finished his second circumnavigation successfully at the age of sixty-six. There is a lesson for almost everyone in Pidgeon's way of life. I came to know the man well, and to admire him. His hair seemed no whiter when I met him for the second time, the grey eyes were still keen and steady, the sea-tanned face smiling and healthy as ever.

When our boats lay moored together Pidgeon would come over for supper with me sometimes on Saturdays, and sit yarning until long after midnight. Talking is a luxury when a man has been alone for months on end. It was then that I gathered some of the threads of Skipper Pidgeon's life, and I realised that I was listening to a character such as one meets seldom in

the twentieth century. For the real Pidgeon is not the Pidgeon of newspaper interviews; not even the Pidgeon who appears so modestly in his own book "Round the World Single-handed." He has been called a hermit, a woman-hater, a lunatic; all descriptions that are very wide of the mark.

Pidgeon, as I came to know him, is a man with a dry sense of humour, keenly interested in his fellow human beings. He sails alone, usually, because it is not easy to find companions able to break away from their work and circumnavigate the globe. On several occasions, however, he has had shipmates. When he left Los Angeles for Hawaii on the second cruise he carried a crew of two girls. "Husky girls, fond of climbing mountains and handling boats," he

told me. "My niece, and a friend. Oh, they were all right. And, say, I never knew before just how useful it was to have a fair crew aboard. When we made Honolulu the boys used up a whole bale of gasoline showing us over that island."

I looked round the Islander's cabin, wondering how the girls had fared in that strange, masculine place. You have to see Pidgeon's home to believe it. There are no racks or lockers, such as you find in other boats. All Pidgeon's possessions lie in one impressive heap on the deck beneath the coach roof; charts and books in the folds of spare canvas, cameras and tinned provisions mixed up with marlinspikes, water jars and coils of rope. "They can't fall any further," said Pidgeon, "and I know just where to put my hand on what I want."

A hard berth is fitted on each side of the small table. "I always stick to my bunk to starboard, and the girls shared the other bunk," remarked Pidgeon. "One of us was always on watch, so there was plenty of room." Thus the old sailor man solved a problem that might have worried ordinary folk, and having solved it, gave no more thought to the matter. At least the arrangement disposes of any woman-hating tendencies. The man who dislikes feminine company does not shut himself away from the world with "two husky girls" for an ocean passage lasting twenty-eight days.

"They stared at the island peaks when we raised them, and said how green the land seemed after the blue ocean," recalled Pidgeon. "But one of them wanted to sail on round the world. I guess one would have been awkward,

so I left the pair of them in Honolulu to go home by steamer.”

No doubt it was a wise decision, but Pidgeon is full of sea wisdom and far more sane than most people on shore. Surely, you may remark, a man must be mad to spend many years of his life enduring hardships, taking great risks, drifting aimlessly from port to port. The answer is that Pidgeon is a completely happy man. He has established a reputation as the greatest small-boat sailor of his day. His lectures have given pleasure to thousands. When he re-visits old ports of call, he finds friends everywhere. All are welcome on board the *Islander*; he will talk with the same pleasant sincerity to a Governor or a child. There is nothing selfish in Pidgeon's way of life, for no one ever forgets

him, and all memories of him are happy.

It is wrong, by the way, to imagine that a voyage round the world in a 34-foot boat is a suicidal adventure. Dangerous moments there may be, but if you can handle small craft with the skill of Skipper Pidgeon, the risk is small. Pidgeon built the *Islander* himself in 1918, and the little ship has been his home ever since. She is not heavily built, as most cruising yachts are. The secret of her survival lies in the care Pidgeon bestowed on her when he planed each plank and drove home each nail. In spite of her light build, she has pounded on coral reefs and distant beaches, emerging from every ordeal unharmed. I saw the *Islander* stranded in a wicked bay north of Saldanha. She was towed off without a cup of water in her bilge.

The building of the Islander was a job of work done well, and it has saved Pidgeon's life many times.

Little ships like this ride over the huge seas that liners plunge through and throw over their bows. The Islander is lively, but she does not founder in a gale. Crossing the ocean in the Islander means much discomfort, but not death. "I am battered and battered and battered in dirty weather until I wonder why I ever left the shore," Pidgeon told me. "But there's no fool like an old fool. When it's over, I forget it."

Many people are puzzled to know what happens to the ship when Pidgeon goes to sleep. Well, the ship sails on. Pidgeon trims the sails and lashes the tiller, and the Islander then follows the course set, anywhere from close-hauled to running dead before a

gale. That saves a lot of hard labour. Only when nearing land does he lose sleep. You cannot leave the ship to roar along by herself when land may loom up out of the night. So Skipper Pidgeon is usually a tired man by the time he reaches port – it is the penalty of sailing alone, and he pays it cheerfully.

His physical endurance is astounding. Sixty-six, and he looked no older than men of fifty-five. "I had a good breakfast today, and now someone has invited me to dinner tonight – and I don't want to go," he once said to me. "No use overloading the stomach." One meal a day, at sea or on shore, is enough for Skipper Pidgeon. He seldom drinks anything but water. At sea he cooks his meal on a simple wood stove in the cabin, and prefers fresh vegetables and fruit to tinned

provisions. He does not smoke. Yet he is no fanatic about diet, drink or tobacco. His own system is the one he enjoys, and it has kept him fit from Alaska to the tropics.

Now you begin to understand why Skipper Pidgeon is able to sail the oceans, visiting the playgrounds of millionaires and islands of lonely exiles, with hardly a cent in his pocket. He pays no rent, performs the work of the ship himself, and needs food costing only a pound or two a month. Little yachts like the *Islander* are not liable for harbour dues. Friendly yacht clubs are proud to show some hospitality to a man who holds the "Blue Water Medal" of the Cruising Club of North America for his notable deep-sea wanderings.

Nevertheless, if Pidgeon possesses any idiosyncrasy at all, it concerns money.

His income depends on a little writing, a lecture here and there, and nowadays an occasional broadcast talk. But he does not seek money in these ways, and turns to them only when he finds his pocket empty. They tell a story of his first visit to Cape Town.

"Giving another lecture soon, Skipper?" someone asked him. "I guess not – I've still got a dollar."

Skipper Pidgeon has a natural gift for lecturing which, if exploited in his own country, might have made him a wealthy man. Yet he would rather talk to a crowd of schoolboys than address a distinguished audience in New York. Money means nothing more to him than a means of fitting out the *Islander* for her next passage from continent to continent – a few new sails, a lick of paint, and some dried fruit in the store-cupboard. He has dispensed with

money. Save on rare occasions, then, he has ridded himself of one of the main causes of worry among landsmen. I suppose he hears about depressions, but he must be one of the very few civilised men in the world who have escaped their effects.

One more detail of Pidgeon's sea housekeeping should be mentioned – water. Nearly everyone he meets asks him how he manages to carry enough fresh water. He uses half a gallon a day, and stores 120 gallons in casks and jars; enough for about eight months. His longest passage between ports was 88 days, so that there has never been a shortage of water aboard the *Islander*. When it rains he has a shower bath. At other times he throws a bucket over the side and bathes in salt water.

Two other men, Slocum and Gerbault, sailed round the world alone, but their boats were substantially larger than the *Islander*. When Pidgeon was in Table Bay the first time he told me the *Islander* was really too large for his purpose. He wanted a 25-foot boat. Now he thinks she is just the right size. When he sails up to some romantic anchorage at the age of eighty I expect he will tell the reporters that he is thinking of building a slightly larger craft.

But Skipper Harry Pidgeon will sail on in the *Islander*. The two have gone together for so long that it is difficult to think of them apart. It has been a wonderful partnership; these two have made strange landfalls. They have raised the peaks of the Pacific, sweltered together off New Guinea, rested in calm lagoons and raced before the

trade winds of the world. All this they have done while millions toil and fear to leave their dull routine. That is why I say Pidgeon has solved the secret of life. Healthy, fearless, penniless old vagabond of the oceans, I admire him.

Alain Gerbault, the Frenchman, with his narrow-gutted Firecrest, came to Table Bay too, and I talked to him about his voyage round the world. Pidgeon was a normal man. Gerbault, a great lover of the sea and a brave sailor, was nevertheless a man of a different type, an eccentric hermit. He had endured cruel hardships, and I wondered whether he had always prepared as carefully for his ocean crossings as did Pidgeon.

Pidgeon and Gerbault, and indeed practically all the men I met who had made long voyages in small craft, were experienced seamen. I knew one

memorable exception – a powerful Afrikaner from the Northern Transvaal who came to Cape Town on holiday and bought the *Amitia* from me. His name was Dirk Eloff, and he was a grandson of President Kruger. Heredity does count. This man had something of the physique and the shrewdness of his famous grandfather. I gave him his first lesson in sailing, and he was an intelligent pupil. An idea entered his mind and germinated. He needed money for the enterprise, so he returned to the low veld and speculated in cattle. Six months later he was back in Cape Town with enough money to build a forty-four foot yacht for a voyage round the world.

Eloff's yacht was called *Sarie Marais*. Her main cabin seemed to me to be furnished with huge jars of wine and a

bookcase containing the works of Freud. Soon after the launching Eloff was married on board. He took his wife with him, and three men, who were all novices. They sailed away and reached Panama! I have no doubt that Dirk Eloff would have completed the voyage round the world, but his wife was expecting a baby and the cruise had to be abandoned.

It takes brains and muscle to cross the ocean in a small boat, but I think Dirk Eloff proved that long sea training is not essential. As for navigation, he studied his text-books as he sailed and made accurate landfalls. There is a fascination about this game which takes a strong hold on the devotees. Years afterwards in the Western Desert I spent many a night discussing rigs, cruises and other nautical points with Brian Lello, a South African war

correspondent. We forgot the bombing and all the irritations of war as we talked. Lello had sailed from Durban to the West Indies in a twenty-five foot boat. I was amused at his summing up.

“This war may be the big thing in the lives of the other fellows here, but for me it is only a sideshow,” he declared. “I want to see the war finished so that I can get on to something really important.”

“What’s that?” I inquired.

“I am going to build a small boat and sail her round the world.”

CHAPTER 5

THE LONELIEST ISLE

IF THERE is one civilised spot on this globe more likely than another to escape the worst effects of the Second Great War it is Tristan da Cunha.

Tristan lies right in the middle of the South Atlantic. In the whaling days it was a busy spot, for the Moby Dick crowd wanted fresh meat and vegetables, and they called often for supplies. But during most of this century it has been, beyond argument, the loneliest inhabited island in the world – 1,800 miles from Montevideo and 1,900 miles from Cape Town.

I have kept in touch with Tristan affairs ever since I paid my visits in 1920 and 1923. There are no palm trees on Tristan, no calm lagoons, no signs of glamour. It is so remote that

the islanders cannot rely on one ship a year. They count themselves lucky if a ship brings stores once in three years. Ship or no ship, life goes on and the Tristan people flourish on their scanty diet.

Anyone born on Tristan has an expectation of life of about a century. Men of seventy appear no more than middle-aged, the women are all slim. No mother has ever died in childbirth. They clean their teeth occasionally with rags dipped in sea water, and they have the best teeth in the world. You can die on Tristan only as a result of accident or old age.

Obviously there are lessons to be learnt from these people, but until 1938 no doctor had stayed on the island for more than a few days. The naval surgeons from the cruisers in which I travelled examined the

islanders and told me that they could find no disease, no ill effects from constant intermarriage, no serious rheumatism, in fact none of the ills of civilisation. In 1938 a Norwegian doctor and dentist lived among the people for six months, set up an X-ray and laboratory, and went into this fascinating field of research more deeply. They found many interesting things, but it can all be summed up in a sentence – fresh, natural food unspoil in the cooking, and not too much of it.

Only once did the dentist encounter toothache, and that was due to pregnancy. The people seldom eat hard food, and they have little milk; yet men of eighty had not worn through the enamel of their teeth. Bread is so rare on the island that they call it “cake,” and sometimes go for

months without tasting it. The lack of sugar probably explains, to a large extent, the perfection of the teeth. I asked my host, Bob Glass, what happened if a tooth worried him, and he replied : “Oh, I just lever it out with a fish-hook.”

No, there seems to be no doubt that you have to escape from civilisation to be healthy. Even the rigorous Tristan climate has not affected these people. One of the clergymen who spent three years in exile there declared that the people lived at the foot of a sheer black volcano in constant fear of starvation. When the wind rose to hurricane force, he said, it was dangerous to go out of doors. Yet the bitter wind produced no colds. When a ship comes to the island straight from the mainland, all the people suffer from colds for a fortnight. Then there

are no more colds until the next ship calls. A whale ship from the germ-free Antarctic, however, does not spread infection.

I once knew a man who loved the lonely places, and settled on Tristan for a year. Casper Keytel was his name. He was living in a bungalow on the coast near Cape Town when I called on him, and he had no neighbours. As a young man he had hunted big game; the heads he collected may be seen on the walls of the City Hall in Cape Town. Other specimens are in the South African Museum. At one time he managed a fishing business and visited the guano islands off the Cape coast to supervise the gathering of the penguin eggs. In 1907 Casper Keytel chartered a little schooner and beat through stormy seas for three weeks before he reached

Tristan. He built himself a solid stone-walled house. He was a naturalist, a book-lover and a fisherman; and his time on Tristan passed happily. As a trader, however, he was unsuccessful. The sheep he sent to Cape Town in the schooner arrived in poor condition and were sold at a loss. Although the waters off the islands swarm with fish, his fish-curing scheme was a failure. He could not persuade the islanders to catch more than they could eat.

Keytel explored the whole group of islands. The peak of Tristan does not stand alone in mid-ocean. About four hours sail in an island boat, eighteen miles away, lies Inaccessible, scene of more than one drama. Twenty miles to the south-west is Nightingale Island, and close by are two almost unexplored rocks known as Middle Island and Stoltenhoff. To the

south'ard, 230 miles away, is another peak in the volcanic chain of South Atlantic islands – uninhabited Gough Island. Keytel visited all these in search of seals and guano but found nothing payable. I shall return to these islands later. At the end of a year Keytel sailed back to Cape Town – satisfied, I think, with the specimens of sea birds he had collected. He died not long ago at the age of seventy, after a most active life.

If you live on Tristan you must be a lover of fish. There are times when the people have nothing else, times when even potatoes become a delicacy. If you count the sea birds and eggs they eat as fish, and there is not much difference in flavour, then a very high percentage of their total nourishment consists of fish.

Fortunately fish are abundant. In the long kelp surrounding the island you have only to lower a line with a stone and bait attached, and you will haul in up to a dozen crawfish. Indeed, there are enough to justify a canning factory if only the distance to market was not so great. Great shoals of the good fish that live in cold waters are always to be found in the kelp. The men of the cruisers in which I visited Tristan set to work with hook and line at the anchorage and caught enough within a few hours to supply the whole ship's companies for days. Some of the larger Tristan fish weigh up to 200 lb.

The main enemy on Tristan is the rat. A ship called the Henry B. Paul, wrecked there sixty years ago, brought the rats. Today there are rat tracks everywhere, and if you sleep on the island you will be lucky if a rat does

not run across your face. The rats limit all agricultural production. They soon exterminated the harmless island mice, and they have also attacked the small birds.

One of my friends in Cape Town attempted to play the Pied Piper by collecting rat-eating mole snakes. He sent them to the island when the tourist liner Carinthia called in 1936. One of the islanders put his hand into the sack of snakes, and he was so terrified by what he felt that he dropped the whole lot into the sea. The islanders accept the rats as an inevitable evil. They have never tackled the menace with determination, and since the rats arrived it has been impossible to grow corn.

Cabbages, pumpkins, onions, turnips and carrots are cultivated, but never in sufficient quantities. It must be

admitted that the Tristan people are lazy and hopelessly old-fashioned in their methods. One missionary after another has tried to help them raise the standard of living, but without success. Wild berries grow on the south side of the island, and these are gathered for "berry pudding." Mollymauk chicks form almost the staple diet for three months of the year – up to 5,000 are killed during the season. Penguins are boiled for the oil they yield, but are seldom eaten. Albatross and penguin eggs, however, are important items in the Tristan larder. The people still live like shipwrecked sailors. They have a few stunted apple trees, but the apples are picked green before the rats can get to them. Butter is almost unknown. In spite of the monotony of this diet, in spite of the deficiency in vitamins and mineral salts and the lack of bulk,

none of the diseases appear which might be expected.

Meat is a rare luxury. Cattle have been put out to grass at various points round the island, and have become more or less wild. They are blown over cliffs or lost in the surf; but the islanders are reconciled to such blows. The richest man on the island owns no more than fifty sheep, and many have none. These people are fishermen rather than farmers, and they reveal skill and energy only on the sea.

Their boats are admired by all seamen who call at Tristan. The beaches of black, volcanic sand are steep and boats must be light if they are to run in with the surf and be hauled up safely before the next comber breaks. So they build them of canvas stretched over ribs from apple trees. In the old days they used the hides of sea elephants.

These boats, up to 25 feet in length, with six oars and a helmsman, are handled expertly. Only the Tristan boats men could be trusted to land the many tons of stores which the cruisers brought to the island. The heavy wooden boats carried by men-o'-war would have been swamped in the surf. Tristan boats are famous, and the models they make on the island are the most interesting of Tristan curios.

All the cottages are lined with timber from one or other of the seventeen ships which have been lost on Tristan. "Send us a shipwreck so as John and me can build a house and get married," used to be the Tristan girl's prayer; but the missionaries stopped all that nonsense. The village has a Celtic atmosphere, for old "Governor" Glass, the founder, came from Kelso, Scotland. Many visitors have noted the

resemblance between these stone-walled thatched cottages and the Highland villages. Slabs of volcanic rock are used, and the thatch is tussock grass. Watercourses from a spring pass each door.

I dined one night in the cottage of Frances Repetto, "Queen of the Island." She is the widow of an Italian sailor; and though she has never been away from Tristan, she has a keen mind and has reached a leading position by force of character. While all the other women are known by their Christian names, she alone is always referred to as Mrs Repetto. She gave me mollymauk's eggs for dinner – just fried eggs, without bread, tea, or any side dish at all. That is the Tristan custom, one thing at a time, and the dentists believe that this may have

some bearing on the excellence of Tristan teeth.

"The women are decidedly finer specimens than the men," declares a British official report on Tristan. "Their features are regular, pleasing, and of somewhat Semitic type." I cannot confirm the last impression, but I did observe several good-looking girls on the island. There were too many men at that time, and competition among the Tristan lads was desperate. It is not uncommon to see the young men and women wrestling – a sign of affection – and the muscular girls hold their own very well. A young man courting makes a pair of moccasins of penguin skins, and if these are accepted the engagement becomes official. The couple then join the other island lovers who walk down to the beach on

Sunday afternoons and occupy a special reserve.

Girls of fourteen are courted. There appears to be very little immorality. Few illegitimate children have been born on Tristan. I did hear of a young man who tried to avoid marrying the mother of his child. Every time a cruiser called the chaplain would hear about this affair and look for the man; but he was always in hiding up the mountain while the ship was there. Now the arrival of a ship is naturally the event of the year at Tristan, and the man was depriving himself of all the pleasure and excitement of the visit. It could not last. One day when the traditional cry of "Sail-ho!" rang through the settlement he went down to the beach with the others and the chaplain got him.

One or two people who lived for long stretches on the island have mentioned promiscuity among the married couples. A visitor has no opportunity of forming an opinion. There is certainly no crime. The people would share their last fish with shipwrecked crews, but there have been no wrecks since the sailing ship days. They are simple, likeable people, as intelligent as a lone island community could be expected to be.

Dancing is their favourite amusement. Andrew Swain, the hunchback fiddler (injured in a boat accident), plays for them; or they dance to a gramophone presented by King George V. They love old English seafaring melodies and old hits like "Anne Rooney." In their dances all the origins of the island people may be traced. There is a St. Helena dance, an Italian country

dance, one from the Cape and a Tristan fox-trot.

Their speech has been described as a broad West of England dialect with a touch of the twang. I had heard nothing quite like it on land or sea, though it contains many sea-phrases inherited from their roving ancestors. They call a penguin a “pennerwin”. New words are not welcomed. Their grammar is faulty, their vocabulary limited. Subtlety cannot be expected in such an isolated race, but they have a crude sense of humour, and some minor misfortune is enough to keep the island chuckling for a century.

You can see this in their homely place names. Pigbite and Ridge-where-the-Goat-jumped-off speak for themselves. Big Beach and Little Beach ... Elephant Bay ... Deadman’s Bay ... Burntwood ... Half-tree Hollow

... these were names bestowed by the “old hands,” as they call their ancestors, names heard every day. The surveyor who corrected the chart of the island in 1938 discovered that several place names on the Admiralty chart were unknown to the islanders. The old chart, incidentally, turned out to be highly inaccurate. The whole coastline had to be redrawn, and the island became smaller in the process. It has a total area of thirty square miles, and the peak is 6,760 feet above the sea.

The first real settler was a shady American citizen named Jonathan Lambert, mariner of Salem and probably an ex-pirate. He arrived there in 1910 with two others, Currie and Williams, and announced to the world that he had taken possession of Tristan. This was done through the

“Boston Gazette.” Lambert stated that he intended to prepare “a home where I can enjoy life without the embarrassments which have hitherto constantly attended me ... and remain beyond the reach of chicanery and ordinary misfortune.” A grand sentiment, and one which will find an echo in many hearts after the Second Great War. But he should have gone there alone. Six years later a British garrison arrived from South Africa – five officers, four sergeants and thirty-four privates, with ten wives and a dozen children. They were sent there because Napoleon was on St. Helena, and it was thought that Tristan might be used as a base for an attempted rescue. When the garrison landed, only Currie remained on the island.

Currie told the newcomers that Lambert and Williams had gone out

fishing and had been drowned. That was his story and he stuck to it. But the garrison set up a canteen, and Currie was a regular drinker; and when he drank he boasted. “If I spent a pound every day of my life,” declared Currie, “I could not get rid of my fortune.” Often, to satisfy his thirst, Currie would disappear into the bush, returning with money. He was never away long, and thus the soldiers reckoned that the hoard must have been buried near the present settlement. According to the island legend, related to me by a son of one of the soldiers, the treasure lies between the two waterfalls above Little Beach, and it consists of gold, silver plate and a watch in a bottle, all contained in a huge copper kettle. There is little doubt that Lambert was murdered for this hoard, and further-

more that the money is still there. I pottered about for some time between the two waterfalls during my second visit to the island, but I realised that the area was too large to search in a couple of days. Currie burst a blood vessel and died without revealing his secret.

The garrison was withdrawn when Napoleon died. Corporal William Glass of the Royal Artillery who had his wife and family with him, secured permission to remain on the island. He was joined a few years later by castaways and deserters, including a naval seaman named Thomas Swain. In his old age Swain always vowed that he had caught Nelson when he fell, mortally wounded at Trafalgar. Glass became known as “Governor” Glass, and he ruled the island wisely and well for many years.

Unfortunately Glass had within him the seeds of cancer – the only case of any disease ever known on the island – and died aged sixty-seven.

Meanwhile there were five men on the island without wives. They persuaded a friendly Captain Amm, whose trading schooner often called at Tristan, to bring five women from St. Helena. Captain Amm had no difficulty in finding volunteers, and with the aid of the Governor of St. Helena five were selected, all healthy and of good character. But the St. Helena people are coloured, and one of the women was a Negress. Captain Amm must have given much thought to the problem as he carried his cargo of romance to Tristan in 1812. He arrived at dawn, put them down on the beach, and sailed away while the prospective husbands, were still

asleep. The men were not pleased, but they took what Captain Amm had provided, and all the marriages turned out happy in the end.

The population fluctuated in the nineteenth century. Some islanders left, but shipwrecked seamen introduced fresh blood into the settlement. After the death of “Governor” Glass many of the Glass family took passage in an American whaler and settled in New Bedford. There were little Tristan colonies set up at New London and other whaling ports, and the descendants are still living there. Others came to South Africa. One of this roving family, Robert Glass, returned to the island after working in New York, London and Cape Town. He regarded himself as my host on the lonely island, and when I arrived for the second time he

sighted me on the cruiser’s quarter-deck and hailed: “Good morning, Mister Green, your usual room is ready for you.”

Two shipwrecked Italians, Repetto and Lavarello, joined the islanders in 1893. They were the last people from the outside world to become permanent residents. During this century the population has grown from ninety to two hundred, but there are only seven surnames among them – Glass, Green, Hagan, Lavarello, Repetto, Rogers and Swain.

Peter William Green, founder of the Green family, was an educated man from Holland. Wrecked on the island in 1836, he became the leading settler after the death of Glass. He was fond of literature, drawing and painting, and his letters to prominent people in England and elsewhere revealed a fine

philosophy and character. He was 93 when he died, typical of the ripe old age to which many islanders lived.

During the 'sixties of last century Tristan became the hiding place of an authentic treasure of £35,000 in gold and notes. A brig named the Lark, privateer and smuggler, was lost on the Tristan coast and Captain Summers and Henderson, his mate, saved the money chest. A ship called and rescued them, but for some reason Summers found it inadvisable to take the money with him. He died on the way to the United States, leaving Henderson in sole possession of the secret. Henderson worked hard and saved for years with the idea of chartering a small vessel to lift the treasure. At last he achieved his ambition, reached the island in the

schooner Rover, and returned safely with the money.

Tristan has produced many characters. One, a remarkable woman named Mrs Mary Green, settled in Cape Town and died in 1934 aged 102. I visited her in the cottage high above Simonstown where she lived with two sisters, and learnt much early Tristan history from her. She was a daughter of one of the first settlers, Alexander Cotton, a naval seaman who had guarded Napoleon at Longwood. For decades after leaving Tristan she clung to the island headdress – a handkerchief folded cornerwise and knotted under the chin, always known as a “hangcher.” Every mail from Tristan brought her white woollen stockings spun and knitted on the island.

This aged woman had never suffered from nerves, indigestion, toothache or

insomnia. Her sight was excellent, hearing unaffected by the years. The other two sisters sharing the cottage were similarly healthy, one lived to 99 and another to 104. Yet another sister, whom I had met on Tristan, ended her days there at the age of 94.

All three of the Simonstown sisters had lost their husbands in a disaster such as has befallen few communities in peace-time. In 1885 fifteen men went out in a boat in heavy weather to intercept a passing ship – practically all the adult males of the island, desperate for supplies after a long bad spell. The boat capsized and all the men were drowned.

Among Mrs Green's most vivid memories was the visit of the Duke of Edinburgh, captain of H.M.S. Galatea, in 1867. A great feast was prepared in their mother's house – roast mutton,

parsnips and potatoes. While the Duke drank "Success to Tristan," the islanders swigged a cask of rum, landed from the man-o'-war, and the sisters in the next room tried on the hats of the naval visitors. From that day the Tristan settlement was known as Edinburgh.

Mrs Green had also absorbed St. Helena tales from her mother (one of Captain Amm's selections), including a queer story of an attempted escape by Napoleon. It was believed by the St. Helena people that Napoleon and his friends made a huge balloon but the fabric was discovered by the guards before the party could float away to the rendezvous with a French frigate!

As a widow on Tristan Mrs Green worked her own potato patches, often digging ten bushels in a day. She did

her own ploughing, ground corn, fed the pigs and cattle and took her place in the boat for fishing. Once she made “fifty golden guineas” selling cattle to a passing ship. Today the islanders have no use for money. But in the days of sail Mrs Green saw twenty ships off Tristan at the same time. Thirty years after her final visit she still talked of her land on the island. She had left a nephew in charge of it. All the Tristan exiles are like that, and I think all of them sometimes consider returning to their “property “ on the island.

Inaccessible Island may be regarded as a “no man’s land” awaiting any colonist who cares to settle there. People have lived there under conditions of great hardship at various periods, but today it is again the home of the birds.

One of the most famous wrecks in the history of the sea occurred there in 1821, and the heavy timbers of that ship, the *Blenden Hall*, still litter the beach at Inaccessible. She was lost in a fog, lifted by a gigantic roller and flung on the beach with the loss of two lives. Kegs of liquor drifted on shore, and enough canvas for tents; but the castaways had no food. The mutinous drunken seamen behaved badly. All hands lived on penguins and eggs. The misery in the rain-sodden camp was aggravated by the quarrels of two of the women, who had been at loggerheads all through the ill-fated passage. Yet they survived for three months, until the carpenter had built a boat in which he reached Tristan and brought the islanders to the rescue.

Next came two settlers who marooned themselves voluntarily on the bleak

island. They were the German brothers Frederick and Gustav Stoltenhoff. Frederick had served in the army during the Franco-Prussian War, while Gustav, a sailor, had once been shipwrecked on Inaccessible. Both were suffering from the depression which followed the war, and Gustav thought they could earn a living sealing among the Tristan group. They equipped themselves with the essentials, took passage in a whaler and in November 1871 they were dumped down on the lonely beach which the Blenden Hall survivors had been so happy to leave half a century earlier.

The Stoltenhoffs had with them a whale boat, a glazed window and timber for a hut, gardening tools, fair quantities of flour, rice, biscuits, coffee, tea, sugar, gin and wine. With

the aid of seed potatoes and other seeds, a rifle and a shotgun, they expected to become self-supporting Robinson Crusoe's. For their work they had coarse salt to cure sealskins and fourteen empty oil casks. They were well-educated young men, but their library consisted of only eight books.

Tristan islanders arrived and showed the brothers a route from the beach up the steep cliffs to the plateau – a vital piece of guidance, for there were wild goats, pigs and seabirds on those heights and it would have been impossible to live on the island without them. The brothers cleared a patch at the foot of the cliffs and built a shack. They were burning the jungle of tussock grass to clear a potato patch in April the following year when the flames roared upwards out of control

and devastated the gully through which they had been climbing to reach the plateau. It was so steep that they could only haul themselves up with the aid of the tussock grass – and now there was no grass. The beach on which they had settled, on the northern shore of the island, was shut in at both ends by headlands. Their boat had been smashed in the surf. They faced the problem of reaching another beach which would give access to the plateau and the pigs.

Only by swimming could they solve this problem. Seas were heavy, man-eating sharks were plentiful. By the end of the winter however, they had become so desperate that they decided to take the risk. A French barque had paid a brief visit, taken their sealskins, and given them a little biscuit and some tobacco in exchange for penguin

eggs. But the brothers were tired of a penguin diet and they yearned for meat. In November they swam round the headland, pushing a little raft with their blankets, kettle and rifle.

For a month they lived in a hut they built on the plateau. The wild pigs, which fed on seabirds, tasted fishy, but the goats were much better. The pigs yielded lard in which they fried their potatoes. In December they swam back to their shack on the beach and dug their early potatoes. A few days later the Tristan men landed on another beach, climbed to the plateau and shot most of the goats. The brothers could see the hunters far above them. They were to see no more human beings for ten months.

The food question became acute again in January. Frederick swam round the point, shot four pigs and threw the

hams down the cliff to his hungry brother on the beach. Within a month however, it became clear that the brothers would have to separate for the winter, and again Frederick took up his abode on the plateau. They could see each other at times, and shout simple messages. They caught young petrels in their holes, and they just managed to keep alive. When H.M.S. Challenger called in October, 1873 they had been there for two years and they had had enough. Inaccessible was deserted again.

Inaccessible is only four miles in area, with the highest point 1,840 feet above the sea. It is the home of one of the rarest birds in the world, and the first specimens were collected as recently as 1923 by a man I knew well – the late Rev. H. M. Rogers, who spent three years as missionary on Tristan.

(Poor Rogers was there at one of the most severe periods in the island's history, and I think the privations hastened his death.) The bird is known to scientists as "Atlantisia Rogersi," and to the Tristan people as the "island cock." At one time it lived on the Tristan mainland, but rats and dogs exterminated the species and now it is confined to Inaccessible.

"Atlantisia" is the smallest of all the flightless birds, with black feathers and fiery red eyes. Almost wingless, it compensates itself by running swiftly and shows great cunning in dodging pursuers. It lives in a burrow with three entrances so that it cannot easily be cornered: No one has ever succeeded in finding an egg. The bird is a member of the rail family, and is as mysterious in its own way as the New Zealand kiwi and the dodo of

Mauritius. Scientists cannot explain how the bird, which lost its power of flight, reached the lone islands in the South Atlantic. At one time it was feared that "Atlantisia" was becoming extinct, but recent investigations have proved that Inaccessible gives shelter to many hundreds. They will survive only as long as the island remains free from rats.

As a contrast, Inaccessible is also the home of the largest and strongest of sea-birds, the wandering albatross. This is one of its breeding grounds, and from there it sails on its stately voyages all over the South Atlantic. The Tristan people have devoured so many albatrosses, however, that only one colony now remains, high on the plateau. Fortunately Gough Island provides an inviolable sanctuary.

Inaccessible saw its most recent settlers in 1936, when the Rev. Harold Wilde, resident missionary on Tristan, led a party of young men there in an attempt to relieve the congestion on the main island. A stone cottage was built and 600 bushels of potatoes were cultivated. But the experiment failed. The islanders cling to their old settlement of Edinburgh.

Nightingale Island with the neighbouring islets of Middle and Stoltenhoff, were never thoroughly explored until the Norwegian expedition landed in 1938. Even the Tristan islanders seldom go there. The prevailing winds are seldom favourable, and the fresh water on Nightingale is rendered almost undrinkable by vegetable matter. The men call it "Nightingale beer" and drink it with wry faces. Padre Rogers

paid one visit during his three years on Tristan, and he told me that while it took only four hours to reach Nightingale, they were eleven hours beating back in the open canvas boats.

I think Nightingale takes its name from the voices of the birds at dusk – a magnificent choir which impressed Rogers and a few other visitors from the outside world who have been there. A rocky shelf makes landing possible in nearly all weathers, and a damp grotto gives some shelter. The island is four-fifths of a square mile in area, but the tussock grass, ten feet high, makes walking difficult.

The petrels have their base there. When they leave they fly without alighting on land perhaps for years. Two petrels ringed on Nightingale have been found in Newfoundland. Sir Hubert Wilkins, the Antarctic

explorer, discovered a new species of greenish-yellow finch on Nightingale, a bird with an enormous beak and powerful legs – what the scientists call a “giant form.” Middle Island, low and flat, is a penguin stronghold. Stoltenhoff, on which the Norwegians made the first recorded landing, is approached with difficulty. Gigantic barnacles were collected at the foot of the cliffs.

Gough Island is, of course, far beyond the range of the Tristan boats. Many years ago, however, American vessels used to call at Tristan and embark some of the men of the island to help them slaughter the seals of Gough Island. Explorers have been there in recent years and the late Commander Frank Wild of the Quest added a little to my knowledge of the place.

The position of Gough Island does not encourage visitors, lying as it does 1,500 miles from Cape Town and 2,000 miles from Cape Horn. But from time to time men have lived for long periods on the island and the events in these settlements, if they could be told in full, would make a romantic story.

Gough Island, it appears, was first discovered by the Portuguese centuries ago; the name Diego Alvarez is to be found on old maps. Captain Charles Gough of the British ship Richmond sighted the peak on a voyage to China two hundred years ago, and he was the man who really put the place on the chart. It was not until fifty years ago, however, that the island was surveyed by the officers of H.M.S. Royalist. No attempt was then made to claim Gough as British territory; but this was

done shortly before the Second Great War, and the Union Jack left flying.

Early last century a British man-o'-war, calling there, found the island occupied by American sealers. The lonely islands of the southern seas were rich hunting grounds for those seeking fur seals in those days; Gough Island is probably among the last refuges of the species today. The early American sealers must have found life on the island pleasant enough. The fish are so voracious that they may be caught with unbaited hooks; and the kelp which fringes the shore teems with crawfish. Birds of good flavour have been secured merely by lighting a fire at night – they were so unused to the sight of flames that they flew straight into them.

Beautiful cascades of fresh water tumble down the glens and over the

high cliffs to the stony beach. The island is large enough to support a number of farmers; it is eight miles long, four miles wide, and rises to a peak over four thousand feet in height. Penguins, gorgeous finches and black and scarlet water-hens roost in the tussock grass, ferns and mosses which cover the island. There are no barren spaces. Gough Island is never ice-clad, like Bouvet and other remote islands further south; it is clothed in green vegetation all the year round. Small black thorn trees grow on the mountain slopes – firewood for years to come. There are no rats to eat the crops, no pestilences of any kind. I can picture the place easily, for it is of the same volcanic formation as Tristan da Cunha, but unspoilt by man.

Signs of old occupations, however, remain on Gough Island. Near the

landing place on the east side of the island there is a cave, and in the cave Commander Wild found inscriptions. The oldest simply read “Fred Andrews, 1892.” Andrews was leader of a sealing party which went there in the schooner and stayed for thirteen months. Later signatures were “F. X. Xeigler, R. J. Garden, I. Hagan, W. Swann, I. C. Fenton, Cape Town 1/6/19.” These men were members of a romantic expedition who were marooned for months on the island prospecting for diamonds. A whaler, bound for South Georgia, dropped them there and picked them up again on the return passage to Table Bay – empty handed! Their diamond pans, picks, shovels and heaps of tinned provisions still lie rusting in the glen beside the trenches they dug so hopefully. Two huts also stand as

relics of these old colonies. One, of wood and corrugated iron, was built by the diamond prospectors. The other is much older, with walls of stone and thatch of tussock grass – the home of some forgotten sealing expedition. Perhaps all these fragments of abandoned adventure will be used by some Robinson Crusoe of the future.

The last attempt to find riches on Gough Island was made in 1921, when the steam whaler Truls lay off two weeks while her men searched for guano. Deposits were found, samples were brought back to Cape Town, but nothing more was heard of the enterprise. During the visit of the Truls coal ran low and the crew were forced to kill sea elephants to feed the furnaces. Future settlers will look forward to the coming of the sea elephants to this lonely breeding

ground each year; the blubber will provide fuel for many purposes.

The man who decides to settle on Gough Island, however, must be prepared to be cut off from the world outside. There is no harbour where a small vessel might remain at anchor. Nowadays the only ships that ever sail that way are exploring ships – and there is not so much work left for explorers in the Antarctic. Ten or twenty years might pass with never a smudge of smoke on the horizon to mark the arrival of a steamer. So Gough Island awaits a king – it is yours if you care to charter a ship and claim it. But I warn you that Tristan da Cunha is a metropolis in comparison with forgotten Gough Island.

CHAPTER 6

ROUND AFRICA

SOON AFTER the second visit to Tristan; 1923, I decided that I knew enough about journalism to find a job in Fleet Street. The long route from Cape Town round the coast of East Africa to London appealed to me, for there were ports of call with magic in their names ... Zanzibar, Port Said, Gibraltar. I set out with many letters of introduction, but without much money.

There was a casino at Lourenco Marques, however, and whenever I sit down at a roulette table luck hastens to my side. (I have not tempted Providence too far.) I see the colours, and sometimes the numbers, before they appear; and always I carry away a moderate sum before the luck changes.

When the ship steamed on to Beira, I had recovered part of my fare.

Beira is unlike any other waterfront in East Africa. People who have lived there, and survived, declare there is no port like Beira in the world. They call it the toughest town in Africa, and they never forget it. More tales are told of Beira than of African towns centuries older. The name of Beira litters the pages of autobiographies and the reminiscences of pioneers. It has inspired some of the finest African fiction. Yet I have still to read a word in praise of Beira – reckless, drunken Beira that men of every nation have cursed.

Sixty years ago there was no Beira. Away inland, however, the pioneer columns were settling and civilising Rhodesia, and seeking an outlet to the sea. A glance at the inadequate maps

of the day showed that there was nothing for it but the Portuguese territory, with a port on the Pungwe River as the obvious link with the ocean. Portuguese gunboats nosed into the estuary, the bar was found to be navigable and a certain Colonel Paiva d'Andrada explored the side that has since become notorious. Thus Beira, ill-favoured child of necessity, was born in 1891 and given the fitting name. For Beira means sand, and sand is still the first and last impression of the unhappy traveller landing there. Years ago one stepped out of a rowing boat on to a sandy beach gleaming with bottles. There should be a bottle on Beira's coat-of-arms; no other town has driven so many of its citizens to drink.

Zanzibar stands out in my mind not only as the most dazzling scene of that

voyage, but as one of the most charming islands in the world. I have been there again in recent years, and again the old town captured my imagination. Casual visitors, I am told, have landed on this spice island for a morning and then sent back to the ship for their baggage. It is one place I know to which a tired traveller may return without being disillusioned. Electricity and motor-cars cannot change Zanzibar. The old air of secrecy clings to houses that have seen invasions and hand-to-hand fighting in the streets; houses that watched the buccaneers pass, the shackled slaves, the caravans of Livingstone and Stanley. Sometimes the scene may belong to the period in which we live but gaze a little deeper and you will see the old swashbuckling Zanzibar.



A Zanzibar coffee-seller ... and his customer.

Under the red flag of the Sultan of Zanzibar you will find the most

cosmopolitan island crowd in the world. I do not believe there is another place where white, black, brown and yellow humanity have gathered in such array of nations. Swahilis, Arabs and Indians are the strong sections in Zanzibar's 120,000 population, and there is no difficulty about identifying them. The African coast native all the way from Somaliland to Mozambique is a Swahili. In Zanzibar he is more of a mixture, perhaps, than on the mainland; slaves from far corners of Africa were brought to this melting-pot.

The description given by Marco Polo fits many a Swahili today. "Their mouths are so large, their noses so turned up, their lips so thick, their eyes so big and bloodshot, that they look more like devils." Curly-headed, beardless, negroid people are these

Swahilis, speaking a pleasant-sounding language. If you know Swahili you can travel almost across Africa – like the caravans that spread this lingua franca – and seldom will you be at a loss. The Swahili language has borrowed from French, Portuguese, Arabic and one may recognise English words strangely adapted. Thus the word expressing great approval is “fursklasi,” a present is “krismass,” while the traveller desiring a bath shouts “bafu!”

Imitation comes naturally to the Swahili. He will wear a European suit if he can wheedle one from his master, or the white robes of the Arab. Many Swahili women copy the Arab fashion of the black cotton cloak, leaving their faces uncovered. They are Moslems, but the men will cheerfully accept any intoxicant offered to them. All of them

love music and dancing. “When you play the flute in Zanzibar all Africa, as far as the Lakes, dances.” Cross the creek to Ngambo, a large village of limestone huts with palm-leaf roofs, and you are in the Swahili quarter of Zanzibar. They say that shark and frangipani are the twin odours of the islands, but in these streets the shark smell overpowers all others. There is a whiff of coffee, sold at the rate of three small cups for a farthing by picturesque ruffians who carry their pots with hot charcoal and clink, clink as they seek customers. A nice helping of dried shark and a few bananas or dates bring the cost of a meal up to a penny. At night the drums sound through these streets, and the women sway by firelight to the monotonous rhythm of the “lelemama” dance.

Arabs are found in all grades of Zanzibar society. There are the Oman Arabs, tall and serene men who own land and rank as aristocrats. With their fine features, black-dyed beards, and light skins, they are the Arabs of story books – courteous hosts offering rich gifts on occasion, living in coral mansions with barred windows, proprietors of unseen harems. On ordinary days the Arabs walk abroad in white cotton cap, the long white garment called “kanzu” and sandals. But he often appears in more gorgeous robes, with a brilliant turban and a magnificent dagger in his silver belt.

The lower classes work in Zanzibar as stevedores, basket makers, water-carriers. A blind Arab beggar goes to the homes of the wealthy and recites poetry. Veiled Arab women go shopping in the bazaar. (“It is wrong

to lie – except to one’s wife,” say the coast Arabs.) Silk and gold are the outward signs of prosperity among these people, the old conquerors of Zanzibar.

Nearly all the sects and castes of India are represented among Zanzibar’s teeming Indian population. Hindu and Mohammedan are rivals in trade, living peacefully side by side. There are well-to-do Parsis, smart Goans cooking in the European households, thin-legged coolies toiling with their burdens.

Cingalese jewellers, craftsmen who beautify tortoise-shell and ivory, ebony and gold, live apart in a street of their own. In the Malindi quarter, dark strangers from the Persian Gulf spend their rupees, drink and riot as sailor men will, before staggering back to the dhows. During a short walk on shore

the traveller mingles with Syrians and Congolese, Abyssinians and Nubians, Japs and Chinese, Somalis, coloured men from South Africa, Mauritians, Seychelles islanders, Madagascans, Masai, Turks, and the mysterious black Comoro people who like to call themselves Arabs but who are Bantu in speech.

Similarly all the nations of Europe are found among the few hundred white residents. When you make a telephone call in Zanzibar you do not ask for a number just "Mr. Smith, please." If there is no reply the operator says: "Not at home-they are usually at the club just now. I'll try there."

A small community indeed, but a comfortable one. There is a ship every day in normal times, so that Zanzibar remains in close touch with the world. Electric light wires now run down the

Arabian Nights setting of the streets. Polo, golf and tennis pass the time, though Zanzibar is more famous for its bathing beaches and its fishing. For a hundred rupees a month the white resident may occupy a huge Arab house with coconut trees in the garden and a front door like the entrance to a fortress.

Zanzibar has always attracted men who were ready to tackle any job offering a profit, regardless of consequences. A foreign adventurer years ago agreed to build the ruling Sultan a palace. It looked all right for a time; but the rains came before the roof was on, and the whole Oriental pile collapsed like a sand heap. A second attempt by the same bold contractor was more successful. The building stood serenely until the Sultan defied a

British fleet. In the bombardment the palace suffered again.

Many years ago an American company approached the Sultan with a railway scheme. The enterprising Americans offered to fit the palace with electric light and fans if he granted the concession, and thus tempted, the Sultan agreed. It must have been one of the shortest railways in the world. The line started in Zanzibar near the palace, dived headlong into the bazaar, twisted and turned ruthlessly through teeming alley-ways, emerged into the open and ended seven miles away at a clove plantation bearing the impossible name of Bubby. A general manager and assistant general manager were appointed, both at high salaries. Each day the train of open vans carried an excited company of labourers to work

among the cloves, puffing back triumphantly in the evening.

When white residents wished to make the railway journey to Bububu – for experience rather than urgent business reasons – notice was given the day before. Chairs were then placed in a special van, and the train waited, often for an hour or two, while the important travellers made their unhurried way to the station.

Once a Zanzibar railway official on leave in England applied to a great British railway company for the free pass often issued as an act of courtesy to visiting railway executives. The pass was granted, and the official, in a letter of thanks, assured his hosts that they would be granted the same privilege in Zanzibar!

Every traveller who has ever roamed the streets of Zanzibar must have paused to admire the massive doorways in the old coral houses. These doors, with their rich carving and beauty, grip the imagination and fascinate the eye. By order of the Sultan, doors may no longer be torn from buildings and exported from the island. A wise law, for Zanzibar would otherwise have lost much of that mediaeval atmosphere which is its greatest charm. Not every traveller realises the meaning of the carved doors, the symbolism of their ancient designs. Probably most of the island people themselves see nothing more than decoration in these patterns. Nevertheless, a main doorway of the old type in Zanzibar was shaped to give the superstitious Arab household prosperity and protection. The carved

door and frame were placed in position first, the building came afterwards. All the carved doors have certain designs (however much they may have degenerated) in common. The lotus, the rosette, and the frankincense tree or date palm – one or all of these appears in the genuine old carvings. A fish, or some derivative in the form of a pineapple or grenade, may be found on practically every door.

Frankincense stood for water. All the other symbols suggested fertility. Probably they came from Egypt and Assyria, where the Fish Goddess was worshipped. Wavy lines represent water. A carved chain around the door gives the idea of security, and now replaces the real chain used when Zanzibar was a slave market and pirate stronghold.

The great brass spikes and bosses were derived from India, where doors were fitted to resist a charging elephant. Men from India, Arabia and the Red Sea ports were sailing down with the monsoon to Zanzibar nearly two thousand years ago; and all these foreign influences may be traced in the doors of the coral city.

The craftsmen who made these wonderful doors were Arabs and Swahilis. It was almost a vanished art thirty years ago and though Indians have attempted to carry on the tradition the workmanship is inferior. An Indian door may be recognised immediately by the arched tops. The old doors were invariably rectangular.

I was shown the monograms of famous Zanzibar Arabs forming part of the carving. Most elaborate of all were the doors in the Bet-el-Asabi

(“House of Wonders”), formerly a Sultan’s palace. The wood was covered with texts from the Koran, gilded on a green background. This is the largest building in Zanzibar, and the doors are worthy of it. Nowadays a lift carries the traveller up to the roof, and the rooms are used as Government offices.

Zanzibar doors are fitted with strong padlocks at the base, between the carved lions crouching on each side of the frames. Some of the best examples have a carved centre post. I saw a few of these grand old doors painted over by Indians occupying the houses. Most Zanzibar people show better taste, however, and a door in a house occupied by a white resident is always regarded with pride and maintained as it should be.

When I last called at Zanzibar I was offered a door for £35 – an obvious, recent imitation of an Arab door. As I have said, the genuine old-fashioned article cannot be legally exported though.

I have heard tales of doors being smuggled away at night and hoisted on board steamers off-shore. The ingenuity of the Indian is remarkable when there is money to be made.

The men who carved doors made fine chests, too – the famous Zanzibar chests which are now so hard to find. Late last century a splendid chest, with heavy brass decorations, could be purchased for forty shillings. Today you would be lucky to secure a similar chest at eight times that price. Arab women used these chests for their jewels. There was always a secret compartment, and a bell that rang in

the lock when the key was turned. I was invited to find the secret drawer, and failed. Even a Customs man, I believe, would have been baffled. The owner of the chest pulled out the partition between two drawers, and attached to it was a cunning, hidden tray that must have held the pearl necklaces and gems of a bygone harem.

You may carry off these old-time chests if you can persuade the Arabs to sell them. But the great doors remain, as indeed they should, to speak in the language of symbols and remind all who pass of the craftsmen who have vanished and the Zanzibar days that have gone with them.

At Port Said I had a glimpse of a scene which became much more familiar nearly twenty years later. (There was a South African Air Force fighter

squadron stationed there in 1942, and they held a party at their mess on the aerodrome. All the most attractive French and Greek girls were present. The squadron went on to the Eastern Exchange cabaret. At midnight I stood on top of an army truck unbolting the sign from the famous Simon Artz emporium.) My first visit to Port Said was beyond reproach.

Gibraltar looked to me like a mixture of Portsmouth, Spain and Africa. I drove up to the Southport Gate and was fortunate enough to see the apes scampering up and down the grey ledges of the Charles V Wall. Many residents have never caught a glimpse of them. At that time there were about a score of apes living in the most inaccessible parts of the "Rock." The Spaniards had a saying about them. "When the apes leave the Rock the

English will leave also." They are Barbary apes, the only members of their tribe found in Europe. In their fastness's the apes live on palmetto root, but sometimes they vary their diet by raiding the gardens of date-palms, apples and pomegranates. Some years ago they became British Government pensioners. A military officer was placed in command of them, and each day a soldier left food, to the value of three pence per ape per day, in a spot favoured by the apes. These apes, and their ancestors, have seen much bitter fighting.

Very soon after my arrival in London, I discovered the demoralising experience of hunting for a job. There was nothing really desperate in my search, for I could always return to Cape Town if I failed; but the constant refusals played on my nerves and gave

me a lasting sympathy with all those who are turned away from door after door.

I had to find a way out of the tyranny of the regular job, and hammered my typewriter with tireless cunning. At that time many of the morning and evening newspapers in London published short topical articles on their leader pages. The "Daily Mail" used six every day, each of about four to five hundred words. I tackled this market with some success. There were days when I opened my papers to find my name in several, and each little article brought in from two to three guineas. I could complete an article like that in an hour, and though many came back the monthly average was always satisfactory.

Then I sold longer articles to the "Wide World Magazine", "Chambers'

Journal", and other magazines further afield. The "Sunday Express" paid me a couple of guineas a week for working as a sub-editor on Saturday nights; and from there, after an interview with the formidable R. D. Blumenfeld, I graduated to the even more precarious "Daily Express."

But this was not the atmosphere for me, though my income was higher than ever before. Ambition has never got me round the throat, but the November fogs in London were choking me. I had learnt that the newspapers and magazines of the world were ready to send cheques to anyone with something interesting to say; and I made up my mind to fire at them from long range, from my base in the South African sunshine.

I had spent a week-end sailing in the Thames estuary with H. E. Turnier,

secretary of the Empire Press Union. He 'phoned one day to offer me a voyage round the world. The battle cruisers Hood and Repulse, with a squadron of light cruisers, were off to "show the flag," and he had been asked to find a journalist from each Dominion to accompany the cruise. I put Fleet Street behind me in an instant, and boarded Repulse at Portsmouth on a raw November night.

If there had been no Second Great War I would have given you an impression of life in a battle-cruiser. As it is, I feel that this ground has been covered by too many pens. You know the wardroom and mess-decks, the bridge and the turbines. Roll southwards with me to Freetown, and watch the lion-shaped mountain of Sierra Leone rising from the sea.

As the battle cruiser closed in with the shore I saw again the wreck at the harbour entrance, the red-roofed houses, tin sheds on the waterfront, crazy native huts built up on piles. The same tree trunk canoes came out loaded with tropic fruit, monkeys and parrots, mats and baskets and dimpled whisky bottles covered with leather. This time, of course, I was allowed on shore.

Freetown has always been a bad place for the white man. There was a Colonial Office official travelling in the flagship who tried to persuade me that British West Africa had been "cleaned up", that it was not unhealthy, and that frequent leave was no longer necessary. I did not believe a word of it then, and I still do not believe it. My advice to any young man seeking a career abroad is to keep

clear of West Africa. Go to the West Indies if you like, or South America or even East Africa; but those deadly lands stretching from Dakar down to the Congo – there life is not worth living except in the evening when the bottles go round.

In Freetown only the negroes are at home. There is a great deal of surface religion in Freetown, for the negro loves music and ceremony. You see black deans in knee-breeches, muscular black curates wearing horn-rimmed spectacles. In the courts, barristers and even judges are natives. The British Colonial Office knows very well that this is not the white man's country, and it is trying to teach the negro to manage his own affairs.

Trade is the great and last impression every traveller carries away from West Africa. The whole coast, the very surf

on the beaches thunders the tune of trade. In Freetown the pot-bellied children hawk baskets of fruit, and a boy of six tries to sell you a green squirrel as you walk off the landing stage. Trade goods from Birmingham litter every pavement ... boots and caps, soap and perfumery, cotton goods and beads. And from the forest depths of the hinterland come palm kernels and kola nuts, palm oil and ginger.

At that time there were only twenty-five white women in Freetown. I remember a remark one of them made to me, a haunting remark, full of the wisdom of personal experience. "West Africa is grotesque," she said. "Everything is twice the size it ought to be, or else incredibly small ... and there is nothing permanent except the ghastly spirit of the place."

One night in a military club in Freetown I noticed the English mail papers lying rolled up and unopened on the table. I asked an officer about it. He said that after the first few months they lost interest in the papers; they became too bored even to glance at the pictures. This may have been an extreme case, but it affords a glimpse of the West African "cafard" which afflicts white men in exile. Very few are strong enough to remain untouched by that atmosphere. I know better places in Africa than Freetown and the grim West Coast.

It was in Freetown that I first encountered that strange lingua franca known as "Coast Pidgin," the baby-talk which replaces English when white men and natives have something to discuss.

"Pass chop, massa?" inquired the white-clad negro waiter in the hotel. "Massa like dem omleg or dem cutleg?" The waiter was merely anxious to know whether I was ready for lunch, and whether I required omelette or cutlet.

"Coast Pidgin" is a weird mixture not only of English, but of French, Portuguese and native words, clipped or distorted to suit the negro voice. It has much in common with the "Trade English" of the Pacific and is not unlike the China coast "pidgin." You must learn the strange vocabulary as soon as possible, or your life in West Africa will become an intolerable comedy of errors on the part of your servants. "Pidgin" appears to be a Chinese corruption of the English word "business" and you will not get your business done without pidgin.

The negroes will say sorrowfully: “Dis massa no spik English proper.” For that is the position – in West Africa, pidgin is standard English.

One word in pidgin has many uses, “lib,” for example. The origin is obscure, but there is no mistaking the meaning. “Massa lib for shore?” (Do you intend to go ashore, sir?) Or one native servant will ask another: “Your massa lib for house?” (Is your master at home?) “Fit” is another overworked word, often misleading. “I fit for die,” remarks the pessimistic native when he is suffering from nothing more than toothache.

All cooked food is “chop.” The famous West African dish consisting of stewed chicken and vegetables and various seasonings is called “palm oil chop.” The olives and sardines and nuts served with drinks are “small

chop.” Or your servant may remark admiringly: “Dis massa chop plenty,” meaning that you have a healthy appetite. Animals of many species, alive or dead, are simply described as “meat” or “beef.” A native announces: “I go lookum beef.” He may return with pork, pigeon or a haunch of venison.

The grammar of “pigin” in West Africa is strangely similar to the Pacific “pidgin.” Degrees of size are expressed in exactly the same way – “small big,” “big” and “big too much.” The Chinese version is a shade more subtle, for “little” becomes “liklik.” All three “pidgin” languages reveal the same difficulty in pronouncing the word “box,” for which “bockiss” is substituted. (A trader who told his servant to fetch the “dice-bockiss” was annoyed when the refrigerator was

carried on to the veranda.) The term “book” for any written message is also found in several “pidgins.”

“Dash,” I believe, is purely West African. A “dash” is a present or tip, and you will not get very far in comfort unless you fall into line with the system. When you reach a village on the march you “dash” the headman some tobacco or a pocket-knife. He returns the courtesy with a “dash” of chickens, vegetables or fruit. But it should be noted that “dash” is not regarded as an exchange. The polite fiction of presents is maintained.

So far, “pidgin” appears to be more concise than English, and so it is when one’s demands are simple. Once the native tries to describe something more civilised than food and drink, however, his efforts become both clumsy and humorous. Thus an

ordinary carpenter’s saw is translated: “One big knife too much for cut plank he come he go he come he go.” A piano is similarly laborious: “One big bockiss too much massa fight him from outside he cry from inside.” When the missionaries first played the piano the natives said: “Big fellow bockiss you fight him in teeth he cry.” An accordion is naturally “small fellow bockiss you shove him he cry you pull him he cry.” Bible stories, prayers and even the Ten Commandments have been translated into “pidgin” by missionaries.

All this “pidgin” jargon grew out of the first contacts of sailors and traders with primitive peoples. It is not remarkable that the niceties of speech should be lacking. In such a lingua franca as this does wild Yellow belly Jumbo chat with educated Money

sweet when they meet on the West African coast and find that they have no other language in common. It is not very elegant, but it is better than babel. “Orright! Palaver finish!”

Repulse anchored in Table Bay. I had an invitation to travel on round the world, with nothing to pay but my mess bill. The newspaper, however, saw no point in financing my travels once the squadron left South African waters. Reluctantly I left the huge grey shape to return to work – to work, but also to plan further wanderings.

CHAPTER 7

THE ISLE OF YESTERDAY

AT LONG intervals, far too long in my life, a steamship company offers me a free passage somewhere. I could buy a farm or yacht or a pearl necklace with the money I have paid over the counters of shipping companies. But one day in 1924 I was offered a voyage as “guest of the company” to an island at the end of the world.

Mauritius was the island, a little fragment of eighteenth century France far out in the Indian Ocean, one of those places that neither wars nor progress can transform. After more than a century of British rule there are still only a few hundred people from Britain among the island's 400,000 population. It is an island where the culture and the lazy old aristocracy are French; where more than half the

people are Indians; where Chinese shopkeepers will sell you a single sardine, a knuckle-duster or a bottle of French champagne. You must know French in Mauritius. Even the Chinese and the Indians gabble a patois and many a French planter speaks nothing but the language of his ancestors. But they are content. Mauritius during the First Great War was the most prosperous island in the world. The price of sugar rose to £90 a ton. Planters who had never before left their island home took ship to France, to the Paris of which they had heard from wistful grandparents. Some even penetrated the unknown mysteries of London.

Port Louis, the capital, is a sweltering Eastern city with that flavour of France which never seems to depart from a land once colonised by the

French. Half-naked Hindus sit over their bowls of rice, mild Chinese in white European clothes hover about doorways hung with paper lanterns; and you will see hatless Chinese women wearing wide black trousers. But there is France again in the plaster facades of the buildings, and when the lean black liners of the Messageries Maritimes landed their chic passengers the place became a little Paris indeed.

In Port Louis you can hear the Muezzin. You can watch the Hindu processions carrying great idols through the streets at festival time. You can see the Chinese bowing with folded arms before the image of Confucius. On a Saint's Day there will be a Roman Catholic procession, with robed and mitred bishops leading a horde of slowly chanting, coloured choir boys. But there are few traces of

Britain save where the Union Jack hangs limply from the flagstaff at Government House.

When you climb out of Port Louis by motor-car along the tortuous road to Pamplemousses you might be passing through some fertile district of India. All the mud huts, flimsy dwellings that go down flat when the cyclone comes, are crowded Hindu homes. Sugar-cane everywhere, and bamboo in every garden. Bread-fruit like huge green sponges exuding from sturdy trees. Fan palms and melons. Forests of casuarina. Fig trees with lianas twisted round their trunks. Pandanus and yellow-green aloes. Higher ground, and you ride through clumps of fern and clusters of mountain bamboo. The air is fresh and filled with odours of the foliage. It is easy to see why so many thousands of Indians

have settled in the Pamplemousses district. Here life is not so hard.

You arrive at last before the white-painted gates of twisted iron which lead to the famous botanical gardens of Pamplemousses. Nowhere else in the world is there such cultivation of the flowers and trees of the tropics. Nowhere are so many varieties of palm found within a few square miles. Toddy palms, date palms, and the noble traveller's tree giving its broad leaves for thatching huts, oil from its seeds, water from its leaf stalks, food from its tender core. At Pamplemousses you see the result of scientific cultivation which has gone on for nearly two centuries. It is not necessary to be a botanist to be enthralled.

Mauritius is an island of beautiful names. There are the cascades of

Tamarin, at the end of the road which leads through gleaming acres of sugar-cane to Curepipe; the seven cascades of swirling, tumbling silver which dash to the sea through a deep ravine. There is the fair district of Savanne, with the pretty little striped bathing boxes of Souillac on the sands – the Deauville of Mauritius. There are villages with names like Rose Belle, Grande Rosalie, and Poudre d'Or. Climbing steeply, encountering many hairpin bends, you may come to the coloured sands of Chamarel, one of the island's great wonder spots. Just an acre of sand, hemmed in by dense scrub, a hillock which is shaped like the waves of the sea; but each wave is vividly streaked with colours, all clearly defined. Blazing, radiant sand of orange, mauve and blue. Throw the sand from one mound on to the next,

and there is a chameleon-like change-green becomes red, yellow dissolves into purple. There is a chemical explanation, but I have forgotten it.

I drove along the sea-coast from Mahebourg to Blue Bay. You approach Mahebourg through an avenue of laden bread-fruit trees. The rain and the Indian women with their umbrellas and large head loads of cane are far behind. Before you lies the sunshine and the sea. The sea with waves foaming forward on to the barrier reef, the remote horizon beyond. Rickety huts with seal-brown roofs, white beaches, loin-clouted fishermen, bulk-palms and tropic bushes. Mahebourg does not hold us long, for this is the coast of the Lotus Eaters, and streets might break the spell.

South of Mahebourg, down the tree-shaded road, you find the bungalows of the wealthy folk under the palms. Seaside palaces, some of them are; and on the lawn of one such paradise I sprawled, drinking English beer, eating sandwiches and melon, listening to the booming of the surf, gazing again on the colours of the sea. At Blue Bay, where the warm sea breaks lazily on pink-veined pebbles and huge conch shells, there is a circle of inviting sand. I stripped, with palm trees for a screen, and felt the sunshine on my skin as I lingered among the ripples of the tide. Look into the waters of Blue Bay and you observe the sea forest, the anemones and striped fish. Leave the waters of Blue Bay, and the sun is your towel. If Stevenson and Louis Becke have ever lured your imagination towards some

dreamy tropic isle you will find all they promised at Blue Bay.

One night I found a guide to the great Chinese quarters in Port Louis. Friends on the island told me that I was taking the risk of plague infection. There is always plague in Mauritius, but I am a fatalist in these matters and I was eager to see Chinatown.

There are eight thousand Chinese in Mauritius, and they have brought their customs with them, their green tea, and opium, shark's fins and crackers, their idols, fantastic masks, and theatres. Until you reach Chinatown you might think that all Port Louis slept. The streets are quiet, with only a few Indians moving silently in the darkness. Then you hear the yelping of Chinatown's myriad dogs, and turning

a corner suddenly you burst upon light and laughter.

I visited a shop famous for its delicacies. I saw beche-de-mer, which is a dried sea-slug, fearful to contemplate; earth-encrusted eggs, which improve, according to the Chinese palate, as they acquire great age; loathsome fish in brine, squids and cuttlefish; oranges dried and crystallised to the size of a marble; preserved ginger in stone jars; strips of roast pig; tinned goods from China, weirdly branded; cases of tea; Shantung silk; tiny slippers and sandals; Chinese crackers and candles; joss sticks and incense. For fifty rupees I could have purchased a Mah-Jong set with smooth pieces of dove-tailed ivory and sandalwood, brilliantly coloured, in a decorated chest.

There was a restaurant where crickets sang in cages of bamboo. Here were pots of boiling oil, chow and mushrooms, and a score of Chinamen jerking nimble chopsticks or drinking with dippers out of wooden bowls. Here was the bird's nest soup everyone has heard about, an inviting delicacy and a crate of living fowls from which one could select a fat bird to accompany the rice cakes, the sweet champagne and fierce liqueurs of the restaurant.

Next I took a hand in a game of fan-tan. On the stool beside the gaming table sat a servant of the place, cutting pineapple at great speed, wasting nothing. His knife slid into the husk, and two seconds later there was a grooved, glistening lump of yellow fruit in your hand. Mosquitoes hung in a silver cloud about the joss, the jovial

joss which keeps evil spirits from every Chinese house and home. The flame of a little wick, burning on a glass of oil, lit up the smiling features of the idol in its arched niche. Next to the joss a door, half-screened by a bead curtain, led to the room of the opium smokers, the dull glow of braziers, the long opium pipes with tiny bowls, the unmistakable odour, and the porcelain pillows on which the drugged men slumbered. A Frenchman who had smoked opium there described the sensation to me. "It clears the brain, a leetle opium, so that you can see through a difficulty ... but too much is not good."

I saw few women in Chinatown, no pigtails, no bound feet. Yet today there are hundreds of Chinese women in Port Louis. There was a time when the Chinese exiles of Mauritius took the

dark women of the place as wives; but word of this drifted back to China, and from some high, mysterious authority came the order that such unions must cease. Soon afterwards an unexpected shipload of Chinese girls arrived. Now Chinatown is pure Chinese.

At a Chinese theatre I watched a drama that has been played on Chinese stages for a thousand years; a slowly-moving play with much intricate detail. At first the percussion orchestra dominated the scene. A man with the cymbals clashed his brass discs at the end of almost every sentence in the play. Another player tapped musical wood. There was a fiddler, whose instrument had a square sound-box and long tapering handle; a flautist, producing sounds strangely reminiscent of bagpipes; and a musician would stand up, remove his

vest, and clash his cymbals with fresh vigour at precisely the correct moment. Another player, still more exhausted, would leave his seat and return with a dish of tea. During a lull in this tornado of sound I was able to turn to the action of the play. What life and colour under the blazing acetylene lights! I stared enthralled at bobbing lanterns, great sheets of delicate pictorial art, banners shot with gold and silver, flaming costumes with richly-ornamented hoops about the waists, winged headdresses flashing, gorgeous peacock robes spattered with scintillating beads. Yellow rugs, the Royal colour, a powerful colour, littered the floor. A backcloth of fire-snorting dragons on rich material appeared. China has a colour language besides the high-pitched syllables of

the spoken word. Life moves to a slow rhythm, but there is no monotone.

A singing servant, possessor of the squeakiest of voices, knelt before a tea service. Without tea and tea-drinking ceremonies no Chinese play could last half-an-hour. The movements of the little actress were so deliberate that I was reminded of the slow motion of the cinema. Yet this was a climax, a dramatic period, for the chattering audience had become silent.

She fanned herself. Her black hair gleamed, the ornament on her head glittered, the yellow and black body swayed, her huge glass brooch dazzled. The music had no cadence, but I felt that the throbbing beat of drum and cymbals was the only possible music for her dance. Stage hands crouched in the wings, unscreened from the softly-breathing

audience, yet unseen, because the drama, silent and tense had riveted the attention.

Slowly a white-bearded Mandarin appeared. With him glided scene-shifters; but the atmosphere was still so dramatic that I hardly noticed them at work. Backcloths and furniture faded out. These two slow figures had achieved a hypnotic effect. Only a deafening outburst of throbbing music drew my straining eyes away. Then the cloths that were blue and gold had disappeared before my eyes. The Mandarin and scene-shifters had vanished. And the tiny, triumphant actress stood alone before a new and radiant panorama of yellow and red tapestry.

Musicians lit their pipes. There had been no applause save the sudden silence by which a Chinese throng

shows its appreciation. Now the entrance of a new character moved the plot – which had begun at eight o'clock that night, and finished six hours later – a trifle nearer the end. She was a young girl who stepped delicately from the shadows beyond the orchestra. A girl with the olive skin which shames pure white, costumed by an Oriental inspiration. I had not realised that a Chinese girl could be so beautiful. A circle of peacock feathers heightened the lovely oval of her face; her orange-tinted robes could not conceal the grace of her movements.

At midnight, glancing behind me, I saw a whole row of solemn Chinese children. The peacock girl was resting on a couch, one slipper dangling, blowing out rings of cigarette smoke, waiting completely at her ease for her

next cue. My eyes roved round the theatre; and such had been the spell of the performance that only then did I observe a most astounding thing – the theatre building itself. Picture a street blocked at one end by a gorgeous stage, roofed over with sheets of tin. A street with double-storied houses at each side, people leaning over the balconies. Houses with large open windows, so that sleeping figures beneath mosquito nets were visible. Canvas chairs right across the street from door to door. Pieces of red butcher's meat hanging outside these doors, inside the theatre. A man cooking over a wood stove on the pavement. Men and women asleep amid heaps of discarded scenery. Fruit hawkers at little tables piled high with cut slabs of watermelon, boxes of litchis (which taste better than a huge

ripe grape); mangoes too, and immense growths of the yellow island bananas; purple sticks of sugar cane; bread-fruit and strawberries. Close by these stalls, an enormous Confucius joss of carved, gilded wood.

A burst. of exploding crackers marked the end of the play. I slipped a five-rupee note into the theatre manager's hand and stumbled half-dazed towards the quay, shouting for Abdul, my boatman, and calling it a night.

The dodo of Mauritius is probably the most famous of all those interesting creatures which have vanished as the result of reckless killing. It was immortalised in "Alice in Wonderland." The name lingers in a phrase. "Dead as a dodo," you say emphatically without visualising the

queer bird which lent its name so readily to the alliteration.

I looked upon the bones of the dodo in the museum at Port Louis, Mauritius, and I heard the island people talk of the bird. Now these people living in the very home of the dodo never speak of it as extinct. They will tell you that the dodo has been seen many times since the year in which the last dodo was supposed to have died. They declare, in fact, that the dodo still lives in remote parts of the island, in inaccessible cliff caves and mountain forests. A fascinating tale indeed, even though it is hard to believe. An incomplete dodo skeleton in the Durban Museum is worth at least £1,000; even the British Museum has had to send for casts. Mere dodo fragments are worth hundreds of pounds.

In seventeenth-century London a dodo was exhibited as a freak. It swallowed pebbles and uttered a cry like a gosling. Another dodo had previously been taken alive to Holland, as several valuable paintings by Savery testify. Thus it is possible to imagine the dodo; from pictures, from a head here, a few bones there, and the tales of old travellers.

The dodo was an ungainly bird, a “ponderous pigeon” with a hooked beak, stout yellow legs and a plump body twice the size of a turkey. The tiny wings were about as useful as those of a Bleriot aeroplane would be when fitted to a modern air liner. A notice in the British Museum states: “The dodo is exhibited here as illustrating quite a serious principle: that in wild nature the creature which finds itself in easy surroundings and

allows its powers to fall into disuse is likely to be exterminated when faced with new and more exacting conditions.”

Some say the dodo had no tail; others describe a short tail which formed a curly tuft. With its ash-coloured plumage and yellowish-white wings the dodo could not have been a handsome bird. Man cannot be blamed entirely for the disappearance of the dodo, for it was almost valueless save as a curiosity, and it is clear that the pig was the real enemy.

A dodo’s egg would be almost as valuable a discovery as a dodo skeleton. The bird used to lay one large white egg in the forest grass; but although an intensive search some years ago revealed a few bones, no egg was found. A reputed dodo’s egg once existed in a Bordeaux collection,

however, while two more – also doubtful in the eyes of scientists – were owned by a Russian naturalist. Yet even these specimens, authentic or not, were worth hundreds of guineas.

Two close relatives of the dodo once lived on neighbouring islands – the solitaire of Rodriguez, which became extinct about two centuries ago, and a nameless and mysterious bird of Reunion. The solitaire has been pieced together almost completely; but not one bone of the Reunion bird has ever been excavated.

“The Whip of God,” the people of the Indian Ocean islands call the destructive cyclones known in other seas as hurricanes or typhoons. From the tropic ports of East Africa to Mauritius, from the lazy Seychelles

south to Reunion, the coming of the cyclone is greatly feared.

Heavy shutters closing flush with the walls were among my first impressions on landing at Port Louis, Mauritius. There the lessons of great cyclone disasters have been well learnt. During the most violent cyclone in the island’s history, in April fifty years ago, the wind first shrieked for hours without causing much damage; then there came a treacherous lull as the centre of the cyclone passed over the seaport. People who had been sheltering behind barricaded doors thought the danger had passed, and opened their houses. With a sound like a human cry of agony the cyclone swept on, killing 2,000 people, flattening street after street of houses and starting fires that destroyed most of the rest. The wind, rotating at a

speed, perhaps, of 150 miles an hour, spared neither sugar plantation, factory, church nor railway train. Ships in the harbour were flung ashore, ships at sea foundered. Other cyclones have taken heavy toll of life and property since then, but that was the most tragic of all.

Dramatic tales are told in Port Louis of the efforts made by anchored ships to get clear of the land when cyclones were reported. The open sea is dangerous enough, but harbours at such times become death traps. Not only the boats, but large ships have been driven into the fields by tidal waves accompanying cyclones. Thus at Port Louis flag signals are hoisted daily at the port office and closely watched by ship-masters, so that no one is taken by surprise. A gun fired from Fort George announces the

approach of a cyclone, and when this signal is followed by a red flag all ships at the outer anchorage proceed to sea. Sailing vessels send down topmasts and yards and prepare for heavy weather. Heavy anchors are laid out ahead and astern. Small craft are hauled on shore, and an expectant hush falls over the waterfront.

For days beforehand the Mauritius Observatory has been noting the signs – the falling glass, sweltering heat followed by sheets of rain, hard gusts of wind, rollers breaking on the coast, and at last the dark cloud and thundering progress of the cyclone itself. The area of disturbance is so large that the movements of a cyclone can be detected 700 miles from the centre.

The havoc of the cyclone at sea is slight compared with the devastation

caused on shore. The rollers, called by the island people “Raz de Maree,” are a sure indication of the approach of a cyclone, and much of the damage is caused by them. The cyclone is a dangerous freak – some islands escape its ravages entirely, others have been considered outside the zone until a cyclone has swung up “out of the blue” and dealt a death-blow. Cyclones may be expected at any time during ten months of the year in the South Indian Ocean – August and September are the only months when cyclones have not been recorded. When the monsoon changes the cyclones are most feared.

Port Louis anchorage is hemmed in by the foliage of the tropics, with glimpses of lagoons through the trees. It was full of brigs and schooners

twenty years ago, island traders smelling of past cargoes – guano and copra, dried fish and cattle. I used to talk to their skippers and mates, and I learnt much about the queer island world of the Indian Ocean from them.

One ship, I remember, had a hen-coop on the foredeck which held not only hens, but tortoises. Such was the fresh food carried for the crew of black, brown and yellow men. A tired white mate with a tar-smeared helmet leant over the rail. He sucked an Algerian cigarette and talked to me of the lonely islands visited by this old vagrant ship ...

Strangest of all was the island of Dogs, which you will find marked on the chart as Juan de Nova, off the Madagascar coast. As you approach this low, sandy island the most prominent object is a ship. No smoke

comes from her funnel for she has been aground on those coral reefs for decades without breaking up – the Tottenham of London.

Bluff-bowed East Indiamen, Portuguese galleons, pirates of many nations used to fill their water-casks and gather coconuts and turtles at Juan de Nova. Dogs of every breed, some from Europe, others from China, escaped on shore, and were left behind. Today their descendants, a wild mongrel horde, are the rulers of the island. They have the place to themselves; and boats' crews landing there for water have been fiercely attacked.

When they returned to savagery the dogs of Juan de Nova lost their barks. They call to each other on a weird note which is like no other sound. They droop their tails like wolves. The dogs,

hunting in packs, seem to have divided the island to their own satisfaction. One pack never invades the territory of another. They scratch in the beaches for turtles' eggs, eat the turtles that crawl out of the sea, and stalk sea-birds with the cunning of jungle beasts. For years they have remained unmolested among the palms and bananas of their island kingdom. Juan de Nova is shaped like a horseshoe, and there was a time when the pirates careened their wooden ships within its shelter. The dogs of the island are almost as dangerous as the sea-rovers of old.

In mid-ocean, between Madagascar and Mauritius, lies solitary Tromelin Island. It is away from all the usual sea-tracks and trade routes; for that reason it was one of the last islands of the Indian Ocean to be placed on the

chart. Two hundred years ago the French man-o'-war Utile was sailing through the night, bound for Reunion, her captain never dreaming that a mass of sand and coral lay across his course. When the look-out sighted breakers ahead it was too late. The Utile stove in her planking on a fringe of coral reef and foundered. About sixty sailors and a number of black women – “stowaways” the official record calls them – reached the island in safety. Fifteen years later the castaways sighted their first sail. By that time all the sailors had died and there remained only seven women. Fifteen years! The island is only a mile long and half a mile wide, the northern part covered with bushes, the southern part very low. Here, scorched by the sun, cowering under the cyclones that sweep these seas, the survivors had

existed all that time. Fish and brackish water kept them alive. Captain Tromelin, who rescued them, gave the island his name.

North of Madagascar are the Aldabra Isles and the Seychelles, last natural home of the giant “elephant” tortoises. For centuries ships crews have been raiding these jungle-clad isles and carrying off the tortoises as food. Tortoises stand exposure to all sorts of weather and live through the longest voyage. They form the ideal “live-stock” for a sailing ship, and are regarded as a certain preventive of scurvy. Every family in the Seychelles Islands owns tortoises. When a baby is born, a young tortoise is marked with the baby’s name. Twenty or thirty years later the tortoise is sacrificed for the wedding feast.

Praslin, another island of the Seychelles group, has a true atmosphere of mystery. On this small island, and nowhere else in the world, grows the famous coco-de-mer palm, whose immense fruit contains one or more nuts, shaped like the lower part of the human body. The first of these nuts ever brought to Europe was found floating in the sea. For two hundred years after that the home of the coco-de-mer could not be traced. Scientists proclaimed it the fruit of a tree growing on the bed of the ocean! The discovery of Praslin Island settled the matter.

But no explanation of the strange ancient graves in the bush of Praslin has ever been found. They are shaped like sarcophagi. Though the natives place white flowers on them every year, they have no burial custom or

legend to throw light on the mystery. It is possible that the early Arab seafarers, who explored so much of the East African coast in their dhows, left their dead on Praslin to puzzle the archaeologists.

Many Indian Ocean islands have characters of their own; they are so different from sister isles close by that they might be on the other side of the world. Round Island, twenty-five miles from Mauritius, is an example. There are no snakes on Mauritius; but a poisonous snake, coloured red, white and black, thrives on Round Island. It does not retreat from the human invader, but rears its head and prepares to fight. The plants and flowers of Round Island are utterly different from those of Mauritius. There is a small palm-tree which – like the coco-de-mer – is found nowhere else. Wild

rabbits and goats, lizards, spiders, and scorpions are permanent inhabitants of the island. Sea-birds lay their eggs on the bare rock, confident that they will not be disturbed. And indeed visitors are rare. Landing is possible at one spot only – a table rock at the foot of a cliff and then only in fair weather.

The Breton privateers who made their nests along the Madagascar coasts and among the islands late in the eighteenth century left many a tale of hidden treasure. On Round Island, it is said, there is a fortune of pearls and Spanish doubloons awaiting discovery. One treasure-seeking expedition from Mauritius was marooned on the island for weeks during heavy weather. They lived, mainly, on heart of cabbage-palm and sea-birds' eggs; and they found nothing but a few skeletons. So Round

Island slumbers, through the years, keeping old secrets.

Early navigators, with a strong sense of the fitness of things, named one group in the Indian Ocean the "Isles of Death." Modern charts call them the Cargados Carajos Shoals. They are simply an outcrop of coral in a great expanse of empty sea-forty islets, only a few feet above the surface, swept by the south-east trades, green and white with casuarinas and surf. Some have names – Siren, Frigate, Albatross, Mapare, Avocare, Coco; others are little reefs and sand-banks which vanish under the assaults of the gales, only to reappear by the industry of the coral insect. Anchors of obsolete patterns and the bones of long dead ships, explain the grim name "Isles of Death." Who knows how many frigates, three-deckers, and barques

crashed to destruction on these low-lying shoals?

Year after year the fishermen of Mauritius make sail and steer for the "Isles of Death." The lagoons boil with fish, from barracuda to the great sail-fish weighing three tons. Thousands of turtle are captured on the beaches. "I never tired of eating turtle," a man who fished among these islands once told me. Flavoured with spices, Amontillado, onions, and cayenne pepper, the soup is superb. Such are the "Isles of Death"; the isles of old wrecks that never come into the day's news nowadays; restful isles, shining under the white trade clouds, far out in the Indian Ocean.

Reunion is the Island of Exiles. It has taken the place of St. Helena in our modern world; the French banish dangerous political prisoners to the

island. Abd-el-Krim, once leader of the Riffs, was sent there. An idler's paradise. The French settlers and half castes who are at home on Reunion, and the noble company of beach-combers, are seldom disturbed by the ideas of the feverish world outside. Sugar-cane, one of the simplest of tropical crops to grow, covers the mountain slopes. Mangoes, bananas, fish and chickens are so abundant that no one goes hungry. Rum, distilled from the local sugar-cane, costs only a few centimes a glass. Even the beachcombers can afford it. Labourers are imported from Madagascar to collect the harvests of geranium, ylang-ylang, and patchouli, from which essences are distilled.

Generations of sleepy folk have produced startling mixtures of race and colour on Reunion. You see blue

eyes set in ebony negro faces, and Chinese eyes and cheekbones beneath flaming red hair. “Demain” (tomorrow) is the watchword of this serene isle.

Lonely isles, little changed since the Malays first came sailing down from the north in their great catamarans, seeking new land. A trader’s bungalow here, a fishing station or guano depot there, set on islands in emerald seas, forgotten by the world.

CHAPTER 8

HEART OF DARKNESS

THE LONG dark train was hauling out of Cape Town on the run of more than two thousand miles to the Congo. It was June, 1927, and I was on board this train, bound for Paris, London and New York by the most weird and roundabout route I could afford.

Nearly a week I spent in the train ... north past the vine-yards and orchards of the Paarl ... across the wastes of the Karroo ... past the blue mine dumps of Kimberley ... taking Bechuanaland in its stride ... curving, whistling, clattering through the green bush to Bulawayo. At dawn next day I saw grey clouds against a crawling line of fire as the sun rose – “Mosi-oa-Tunya,” the “smoke that sounds,” as the Mashonas say. Here was the spray of the Victoria Falls.

These Falls have claimed many lives. How many natives have been swept into the abyss in the past will never be known. But before the white man came there was not a tribe, not a hut within sixty miles of the place. The natives say there is a spirit, greatly feared, in the vapour of the Victoria Falls; and that deep in the Boiling Pot there dwells a monster that appears, at intervals of many years, to seize a victim.

“Musa-l-nunya,” the Arabs called the Falls-the “end of the world.” There is a sinister fascination in these roaring waters that makes most people who stand on the edge think of death. It is a place where even the normal man and woman may experience that queer suicidal urge to drop forward into the maelstrom.

If you wait long enough at the Victoria Falls, they say, all your friends will visit you at least once. Certainly there are few remote places in the world which have drawn so many visitors to gaze and marvel. Every hunter and adventurer in Southern Africa must pass this way. It has been the starting point and the half-way house of men who have made history north and south of the Zambezi. Yet ninety years ago the Victoria Falls were but a native rumour, followed up and transformed into reality by David Livingstone.

Rightly the Falls have been left almost as Livingstone found them. A white, pleasant hotel now stands on the fringe of the jungle; and a bridge has been flung across the chasm of the Boiling Pot. But the Rhodesians will have none of those distracting marks of

civilisation that have taken away some of the glory of Niagara. No longer do you meet a hundred buffalo in the Rain Forest as did Chapman and Baines, the explorers. But the baboons still feast and fight in the trees near the hotel; the egrets flutter like a white cloud over the river and vultures circle in the blue. In these waters there has been no massacre of the hippos, though they have attacked canoes and caused many fatalities.

During the construction of the famous railway bridge, a masterpiece of engineering, two lives were lost. When you stand in front of the hotel and see the slender silhouette like a steel rainbow four hundred feet above the Boiling Pot you marvel that no more than two were killed in such a daring feat. It would have been easier, and safer, to have taken the bridge across

another gorge; but Cecil Rhodes himself selected this spot.

“I want the trains to stop on the centre of the bridge,” declared Rhodes. “I want the spray from the Falls to wash the trains as they cross the bridge.” For many years the trains did stop between the sickening precipices; but when I travelled north to the Congo the custom had been abandoned. Those are breathless moments, even now, as the long north-bound train crawls for 650 feet across the three spans of the bridge. “Mosi-oa-Tunya!” What tales are in your mighty voice!

After the Victoria Falls the dining-car had lost its smart company of tourists. Men going to lonely places stared a little wistfully into their glasses and remembered their quinine. One of them told me a story of the line over which we were travelling. It happened

during the early construction days. A railway truck loaded with goods for the pioneer store-keepers (including many cases of whisky) vanished without trace. It seemed incredible; but the most careful investigation as far south as Cape Town revealed no clue. Actually it had been stolen, and this was the method. The thieves had uncoupled the truck near a forgotten “spur” in the line leading to a disused ballast pit. They had run the truck into the pit, used a charge of dynamite to cover the line with soil, and then looted it at their pleasure. Months afterwards the truck was found – but not the thieves, or the whisky.

In those days the Rhodesian engines burnt wood fuel, and on a long run the fireman usually found his supplies dwindling. The train stopped, and the passengers were turned out to chop

wood. Sometimes the passengers, puzzled by a long delay, would look out and see driver and fireman returning with a buck they had shot. On one famous occasion a main line train shunted back several miles in the night to enable a drunken miner to search for his false teeth, which he had dropped out of the window.

This railway to the Congo was one of the late George Pauling's achievements. He was the greatest tropical railway contractor of his day, and his exploits were remarkable. When Pauling set off into unmapped bush to survey a new route, he was accompanied by a French chef and three hundred native carriers. The "chop boxes" contained rare foods and champagne; an entertainment given by Pauling in the wilds rivalled the best a civilised hotel could have offered.

One stretch of this line runs arrow-straight for 72 miles – a record for Africa. Pauling's men set up a record for the whole world, one that still stands, when they laid five and three-quarter miles of track in twelve hours. Besides the track, in little clearings marked out and protected by upright sleepers, I saw the graves of men who died on the job.

Copper is a magic word up and down this single railway track. Ndola, the last British outpost on the line, was the station for the Northern Rhodesian "Copper Belt" – the largest copper deposits in the world. On the fifth evening I reached the Belgian frontier station of Sakania, where I left the clean Rhodesian train and took my seat for dinner in the grimy saloon of the Chemin de Fer du Katanga.

Compartments in the Belgian train were furnished richly with curtains and tapestried walls. The washbasins were so small that a ham-fisted man could not have washed both hands at once. Above my seat I found a notice in French and Flemish: "In this country the mosquito is the chief enemy. Have you taken your quinine today? If not, attend to it immediately. Beware of the tsetse fly!"

Very soon I discovered a danger greater than mosquito or tsetse. All trains in the Congo are driven by fearless black maniacs. They rattle through the forest, taking steep descents and rickety bridges without slackening speed. Rocket-bursts of sparks from the wood-burning locomotives send monkeys gibbering back to their trees. When the line was first opened the engine drivers were

white men. They drank so much that natives had to be found to take their places. I am not sure, however, that a whisky-soaked European would not be safer than the sober demons who now control the trains of the Katanga. All night the nerve shattering scream of the whistle was heard. The vanity of a black driver is such that he will not pass the smallest cluster of huts without a triumphant shriek of steam.

In the morning, to my surprise, we stopped safely in Elisabethville. Here is a young Johannesburg, a copper mining camp grown into a rich city. A few years before the First Great War forest covered the plateau where Elisabethville now stands. Today the rough tin shacks of the pioneers are seen next to modern cement business houses and pretty villas. It is a town of contrasts and extremes. Bitter, healthy

cold of winter. Malaria and blackwater fever in sweltering summer. The death-rate among white children is pitifully heavy. Until they are five years old they are carried off by little ailments that would mean nothing in South Africa.

There is a continental flavour about this Belgian settlement in the heart of Africa. At sundown the basket chairs in the street outside my hotel were filled with people shouting "Gargon!" and demanding sirops, cocktails and beer. Magnificent Alsatians roamed among the drinkers. A Handley Page aeroplane, flying low, awoke the town with the droning of three engines. This beautiful white machine had come from Bona with the European mails, thousands of miles over the rivers of the half-explored Kasai.

Black convicts, chained lightly neck to neck, marched past the hotel with their warders. White people rode in smart little motor-cars or on bicycles. Here was a mother pedalling up the road with a baby in a basket on the handle-bars. There was a young Belgian with a black and sinister beard, dressed like a hunter in enormous helmet and riding breeches. The military officers in their white tropical uniforms were sturdy fellows. They were training a black army, like the French further north. Bare-footed regiments came tramping down the Avenue de l'Etoile in faultless column of route.

A diamond digger sat with me, talking of marvellous finds in the rivers of Angola. His hand trembled as he threw fifteen grains of quinine down his throat and chased the bitter tablets with whisky. Two Mauritian half-

castes and a Cape coloured man were drinking wine. In the Congo coloured people are equal to the white man and may sit at table with him.

Like many mining centres Elisabethville has to live largely out of tins and bottles. Fruit and vegetables do not thrive. We were sated with tough meat at every meal, but there was little other fresh food. So the grocers kept good stocks of delicacies pleasing to Belgian palates – Russian caviar, tinned trout, pate de foie gras and petit pois. Greatest of all luxuries were iced oysters sent from Cape Town and priced at ten shillings a dozen.

Every mansion and villa in Elisabethville has an immense ant heap in the garden. These grotesque red mounds are put to all sorts of strange uses. Telegraph poles and

electric light standards are planted in them. Some people burrow into ant-heaps and turn them into store-rooms and garages. Others build summer houses on them. Ant-heaps may be used as ovens. Sometimes the ants return. There is a story that a man lost most of his motor car in this way. The ant is Africa's most voracious insect.

Elisabethville may be reached from Europe by a variety of routes. Cases of goods outside the stores bear the marks of Cape Town, Dar-es-Salaam and Beira. A new railway, one of the most important in Africa, reached Elisabethville from Lobito Bay. I am taking the "Congo route" to Europe – four stretches of railway and three of river. Once more I am in the hands of the fearless negroes of the footplate, jolting over the Manhika tableland to Bukama. A night and half a day of this

breathless travel, and the majestic scene that I have been picturing for weeks slides into view – the gleaming ribbon of the upper Congo. Here where the river moves slowly past the tin houses of Bukama it is called the Lualaba; but it is the same romantic river of Stanley, Burton, Livingstone and Conrad. My steamer, the stern-wheeler Prince Leopold, lay moored to the bank.

Three blasts of the siren brought me from my mosquito net at dawn. From Bukama the Lualaba runs almost due north through swamp and plain and palm forest for nearly four hundred miles to the rapids of Kongolo. I doubt whether there is another stretch of river in Africa so rich in life and colour.

The last of our cargo of palm oil casks was coming on board, rolled by

natives down the steep river bank and up the gangway. They sang as they worked. A French doctor, bound for Lake Kivu and the Mountains of the Moon to inspect labour for the copper mines, chuckled as he listened to the artless Swahili song:

“The white man is good!

“The white man is kind!

“The white man is generous!”

As the white foreman moved away the words changed:

“But the work is hard!

“And the pay is small!

“Ai brothers! All together!”

The great paddle wheel thrashed the green water, and the Prince Leopold was twisting and turning and zigzagging down the river as though pursued by a submarine. There were so many sandbanks that it was

impossible to follow a straight course for a minute at a time. An hour after leaving Bukama I saw the first crocodile, waiting at a game path to grip its victim by the nose. Sometimes the engines stopped, and we groped cautiously round a corner; for there was seldom more than a fathom of water under the shallow hull. The captain was not a deep-sea sailor, but a man trained on the inland waterways of Belgium. He was very much in the hands of his Baluba quartermasters, who knew every intricate channel along hundreds of miles of river. When the steamer did lift and switchback sensationally over a sandbank it was usually because the channel had altered since the last voyage.

In the gaps between the trees the red backs of sable antelope showed above

the brown grass. There were hundreds of them, and they turned for a second to stare at the noisy steamer before scampering away. Captains of cargo boats on the river will always stop if you care to shoot for the pot; but the Prince Leopold was a mail-boat, hurrying northwards without delay.

Our chief steward was a man of resource. At every stopping place he hurried down the gangway, accompanied by a kitchen boy. He bartered face powder for eggs with the wife of a trader. When there were British traders he took bundles of newspapers, and the kitchen boy staggered on board with a fat buck over his shoulders. Months before he had distributed vegetable seeds at native villages so that now he received tomatoes and celery, onions and Brussels sprouts. We enjoyed our

meals in the breezy “salle a manger.” The pineapple and mango salads were excellent, and I had not yet learned to hate fried bananas and Congo chicken.

Our first port of call was Kiabo. Just a hot cluster of huts where cargoes were unloaded when the papyrus grass filled the river and made navigation impossible. Joseph Conrad, who once commanded a Congo river steamer, must have had just such a place as Kiabo in mind when he wrote his “Outposts of Progress.” The sound of our siren brought two pale Belgians out of their glass-roofed shelter. In Conrad’s story the climax is reached with that same dramatic sound, but there were no white men alive to answer it.

North of Kiabo we passed the steam pinnacle of an officer responsible for the charting of the ever-changing

river. It was a narrow forty-foot boat, with a cabin on which the sun struck down pitilessly. There was a tiny deck aft, covered with an awning; but from the intolerable heat there could have been no escape. The officer was a Russian, formerly a Captain in the Czar’s navy. His wife was with him in that little boat. Once these exiled aristocrats had a mansion in St. Petersburg.

Lake Kiabo was crossed next day, a line of massive wooden stakes marking our course. During the rainy season the tributaries of the Lualaba bring floating islands of papyrus down to the lake, and stakes have to be driven into the river bed to check the encroaching masses of grass. But in spite of all human effort, river steamers are sometimes held up for weeks. By fixing an anchor into the

papyrus barrier and heaving in vigorously with the winch, it is sometimes possible to clear a channel and steam through. When the papyrus cannot be torn open, all trade along the river stops.

Each village and trading station offered something new. At one all the children were paddling canoes as we passed. It was a graceful picture. At another port of call the witch-doctors had been busy. Some outbreak of tropical disease had given them the opportunity of plastering the faces of their patients with white mud, the cure for many ills.

I had made friends with the French doctor, and learnt from him facts which are not to be found in medical text-books. He had a truly scientific mind, and he was always ready to

examine the methods of the witch-doctors – and give credit where it was due. There was a village on the river almost wiped out by sleeping sickness. I saw the people dying on their mats; a glance at these creatures with the skin drawn taut over their bones sent me back fearfully to the steamer.

“Winning the battle with the tsetse fly,” quoted the French doctor scornfully. “We have our laboratories, the trypanosome has been isolated, drugs have been produced to protect men against the sting of the tsetse. Yet thousands still die. The disease is holding up civilisation.”

My friend the doctor agreed with the many colonial administrators who have suggested that the M’ganga, the witch-doctor of all African territories, should be called in as the adviser of governments and no longer regarded

as an enemy. Thus a storehouse of queer knowledge might be opened and the old mysteries of Africa solved at last. A bold scheme, but a fascinating one.

As the steamer drew alongside a trading station one day the expert eye of the doctor was attracted by a group of natives on the bank. "Come with me – watch some African surgery," he exclaimed. The patient displayed a deep cut in the fore-arm. His friends had secured a number of large black ants, the most ferocious ants in Africa. One by one they placed the ants over the wound. Promptly each ant bit into flesh drawing the gaping cut together. As each ant served its purpose the body was removed, so that the wound was closed as neatly as though a surgeon's needle had been used.

"They have many tricks like that, some not so good as ours and others much better," declared the doctor. "When a jigger flea burrows under my toe-nail, lays its eggs and causes great pain, I am helpless and no white surgeon can remove the parasite without a serious operation. But my black servant will squat down, find the opening and extract the whole cause of the trouble with a needle, painlessly. His skill is something we do not possess."

One of the popular beliefs about which the doctor became most sarcastic was that concerning the age of savages. "These natives of tropical Africa have been living close to nature for thousands of years, wearing no clothes, eating raw foods, and so people think they should all become centenarians," he said. "What is their

expectation of life? We simply do not know. It is impossible to judge the age of an African native with any high degree of accuracy. The white man is still a newcomer in Africa – his records, kept on mission stations and elsewhere, do not yet justify a definite opinion. I think a Congo native is an old man at forty, but I may be ten or fifteen years out in my calculation. Not one native in five hundred ever thinks of his age.

“When I examine labourers for the mines I must first learn the man’s tribal history. I ask him how tall he was when this Chief ruled, or whether he took part in that war; what he was doing when the war was being fought in East Africa. Rough guess-work and a glance at a man’s teeth – then I put him down, perhaps, at twenty and proceed to the next guess.”

Native remedies for such grave diseases as blackwater fever have saved the lives of many white men. Blackwater has taken heavy toll of pioneers. Its origin is still a matter of controversy, though the view that many attacks of malaria and excessive doses of quinine contribute towards blackwater is now generally accepted. Once, most blackwater victims died; today, with careful nursing, most patients recover. There is an authentic story of a planter in the early days who survived six attacks of blackwater and was killed by a buffalo. Nowadays a man is usually sent away from the tropics, or advised to go, after the first onset of blackwater; for the second is usually fatal. I know a native affairs, official, however, who recovered from a third attack with the aid of native medicine.

Africa has been described as the “consulting room of the witch-doctor.” It is a continent offering great material for examination by white science.

“Boom ... ta-ra-rat ... boom!”

Across the great sounding board of Africa comes a barbaric rhythm that has been heard for centuries, a restless throbbing in the night that will last as long as the black man beats his drums.

It comes from the distant darkness, moves like a shuddering phantom over tropical waters, leaps valleys until it has almost vanished. Then another drummer relays the dying tune. The sound goes on vigorously through the palm trees, across lakes, from village to village, taking hundreds of miles of deep bush in its stride. Africa hears and understands.

This is the “bush telegraph” about which a thousand tales are told. White men know the broad effects of drum-talk well enough, but no white man can ever hope to master all its baffling technique. It is now recognised that there is no thought which a clever drummer cannot express.

One day on board the Prince Leopold the captain told us that passengers would be joining us at a Greek trading station further down the river. “One woman-very sick,” he announced. The drums had been talking, this message had come by the wireless of the wilds.

That night we tied up late at the trading station. Out of the darkness of the river bank emerged a thin human column. The leader was a tall white man in khaki. Then a native carrying the white man’s rifles. A “machila,” with the canvas awning folded back so

that I could see an exhausted woman and a very young, very fragile little girl. Then the long stream of porters with their head burdens – tin boxes, suit-cases, packages of food, camp beds, all the necessities of tropical travel. They sank down, utterly exhausted. Only the white man seemed unconscious of the forced marches they had made to reach the river in time to join the steamer. He was a mine manager, rushing a sick wife and a delicate child to the coast before the grip of malaria became a stranglehold. Every day, in some part of tropical Africa, men and women who have been beaten by the climate are racing with death like that. It is a long drawn struggle, decided by the stamina of panting blacks, the heat of the merciless sun, and the callous obstruction of the living bush.

“Boom ... boom ... boom!” The notes are loud now, for we are approaching the drummer himself in a Congo village. He is beating the town drum – a great hollow log, twelve feet in length and hideously carved. A long slit, and the shaping of the “lips,” control the notes of the drum. This is age-old, marvellous craftsmanship, on a par with the skill required to cast a bell. The “lips” give the drum two voices, one male and one female. A last-minute error in the carving of a wooden drum would ruin the work of months.

The town drum stands apart under a roof of thatch. In many villages the drummer, like a temple priest, has no other occupation. If he is a clever man, it is difficult to replace him. There was a time in the Belgian Congo, however, when a drummer who made a serious

blunder in transmitting his chief's messages was punished by having his hands chopped off.

Watch the drummer at work, and you will see his face twist and grimace with every note struck. I have never succeeded in following this procedure, though it seems probable that there is a link between the contortions and the drum message.

Drums, of course, are used for many other purposes. It is said with truth that the drum is the African native's gramophone and orchestra, besides being his radio, telephone and telegraph. Much trivial gossip goes by drum. Births and deaths, feasts, fishing, hunting exploits may make news only within a short radius. Dance drums I saw were headed with leather, shaped like capstans and beaten with pellets of crude rubber to give the

"ruffle" effect. Every large canoe on the Congo carried a drummer to encourage the paddlers.

Traders use the drums to communicate with outlying stores. One man I know was successful in telling a fellow trader that a cable had arrived summoning him to London by the first ship. He had to paraphrase the instructions, of course, and made the liner "one big canoe too much." London could only be translated into drum talk as "big village belong white man over big water."

Captains of river steamers on the Congo send messages every day by drum. The stern-wheelers burn wood fuel, and the drums advise the fuel stations along the river when the ship will arrive and how much wood she will need.

The custom of consecrating an important drum by human sacrifice was common in many parts of Africa last century. It was believed that a drum could not “cry out” properly unless a human voice had been heard in death agony within the drum.

One historic event which set the drums talking far and wide, making a deep impression on the African mind, was the death of the “Great White Queen.” The announcement of Queen Victoria’s death, of course, reached West Africa by cable; but the manner in which it spread from the coast, beyond the telegraph lines, was remarkable. Scores of white officials heard the news from their servants.

Missionaries summon their followers by drum message. A typical example was supplied to me by a Roman Catholic priest who had started a farm

settlement, and wished the distant tribesmen to come down the river to burn grass. They arrived at the right time with the right equipment – large palm branches for beating out the flames when the desired area had been cleared.

A hunter who spent years in the Congo told me that he was marching through a territory devastated by sleeping sickness and abandoned by the tribes. He heard a faint tattoo, a beating of sticks on hollow wood. Turning to his gun-bearer, he said: “I thought you told me there were no people here?”

The native smiled “Sokomatu,” he replied.

They marched towards the sound, and there the hunter saw “Sokomatu” (just like a man) – a chimpanzee drumming happily on a log.

“ Tom ... tom ... boom ... ta-ra-rat ... boom! “No wonder a white man cannot move in the African bush without news of his march going ahead. Somewhere tonight a savage is hammering out that barbaric rhythm. Faintly comes the reply – so faint, perhaps, that he can read it only as we fill in the gaps in a half-heard, remembered tune.

The white man hears and that is all. “Boom ... ta-ra-rat ... boom!” Africa hears and understands.

Our deck-hands on board the Prince Leopold seemed to have been recruited from among the most villainous blacks in the Congo.

They mingled with the crowd on shore, stole eggs, fruit, anything they could snatch away from the children, and hurried back to the ship with their

loot. Often there were pitched battles between our men and the men of the villages. The crews always won, for the security of the steamer was theirs whenever they were outnumbered. They took cover behind the stacks of wood fuel on the lower deck and hurled sticks at their enemies. There was nearly always an organised chorus of curses as we steamed away from a village.

Take away the risk of disease, and many of the river trading stations would not be unpleasant places in which to make a fortune. They all look very much alike. A thatched house with bamboo walls, packing cases as tables, canvas chairs, tattered newspapers, and a pet monkey on the veranda. Bananas as long as your forearm growing in huge bunches outside. Scales for weighing the small grown

kernels which are crushed for oil. A store crammed with cloth of every gay pattern likely to appeal to the exacting native taste. Teeming huts of black people. Great dug-out canoes, capable of carrying two tons of cargo.

Five days on the river, and soon after breakfast we were at Kongolo, with the train for Kindu waiting. There was a fettered native on the platform at the end of my coach on the train. Two black soldiers with fixed bayonets scowled down on him. He had shot two white men dead, wounded many natives, and escaped into the forests. For weeks there had been a reign of terror around Kindu. So five hundred black soldiers came up the river to hunt the murderer. They found him at last, and here he was, with the five hundred soldiers further down the train in open trucks. A day and a night

through the tall trees, and the train ran alongside another river steamer, the Prince Charles, at Kindu.

The soldiers marched on board, found room for themselves. marvellously on the lower deck, and started singing "La Brabanconne" in perfect tune. The well-built houses of Kindu vanished behind the palms, and we were steaming away down the river to, Ponthierville, two hundred miles away.

I had a moment of sadness at the first port of call, for there my friend the French doctor departed. Seventeen days march through the bush, and few white men on the way. "No shops, no cinemas, where I am going," he remarked with a grimace. "And alas! no pretty ladies. I think, when I return, I shall be a gorilla. I shall sleep in the trees." His microscope and case of

instruments were stacked on the bank. As the steamer left I saw him standing beside them – a portly man in grey helmet and hot tweed suit. A brave spirit though, and one of a gallant company who may someday make tropical Africa fit for the white man.

At Waika I found an English Protestant mission. White-clad natives crowded down the stone stairway leading to the river. As the Prince Charles slid cautiously alongside an elderly white woman came down the steps to collect her letters. Her husband, the missionary, was away in the bush, finishing part of his life's work, a Kiswahili dictionary. This old woman was alone at the mission, keeping things going, ruling all these savages by strong and kindly personality. I looked round the fruit gardens with their clipped hedges. The air was

sharp with the scent of ripe lemons. A corner of England in Africa. Think what you will of missionary methods, you cannot but admire the courage of these old people, doing their duty as they see it, year after year, in this grim land.

At sundown on the second day we reached Ponthierville, with a journey on another of Africa's crazy railways ahead. There are eighty miles of rapids, the famous Stanley Falls, between Ponthierville and Stanleyville. A tiny train, so roughly finished that it appeared to have been made on the spot, covered the distance in eight hours. Some of the coaches had canvas pouches in which an acrobat might have slept. Others had narrow cane seats. There was no bedding, and jaded curtains divided male from female in the carelessly inadequate

fashion of the country. An eccentric in search of a wash would have been disappointed. Though we crossed the Equator in the night, not even drinking water was provided.

So we clattered away into the darkness, and at six in the morning, unwashed and unrefreshed, reached Stanleyville and the great central waterway of the Congo. Stanleyville is not the largest town in the Belgian Congo, but it is by far the most beautiful, and worthy of the explorer. A terrace of palms and mangoes lines the right bank of the river. Behind them are yellow houses and white houses, new brick and cement offices and large stores. The waterfront is the busiest street. Great paddle-wheel steamers come up the river from Kinshasa on Stanley Pool, a thousand miles away. Lofty passenger boats

with three decks and white-painted cabins – Michelin, Tabora, and the old Kigoma which was once in service on the Mississippi. Smaller and dirtier cargo boats with strings of barges astern. Hundreds of canoes, some with grass roofs under which black people are born, and live, and die.

Along the waterfront there is a double-storied house with a wide balcony looking down on a garden of oil palms. The British Vice-Consul, who knew what the food at my hotel was like, took me to dinner there. It had been the residence of the King's representatives for many years. As we lounged on the balcony after dinner, smoking and looking at the moths and bats, the Vice-Consul suddenly turned to me and said: "Roger Casement lived in this house."

Somehow I should not care to live in that old house at Stanleyville. I should be afraid that one night a phantom would come swinging up the garden pathway – a lean phantom man followed by two ghostly bulldogs and a shadowy native; Casement as Conrad saw him. “There is a touch of the conquistador in him,” wrote Conrad. And conquistadors do not sleep easily ...

The Michelin, largest stern-wheeler on the Congo, started downstream in the morning. Flags dipped in farewell. Every veranda along the waterfront was crowded with wistful, waving people. The Michelin was the connecting link with the Belgian mail steamer at Matadi; many lucky ones returning to Antwerp were on board. She was a ship of bananas. On the bridge hung an enormous ripening

bunch from which the captain plucked and devoured whenever the intricacies of Congo navigation allowed him a moment. There were bananas a foot long outside the steward’s cabin. Every passenger had a bunch. We had raw bananas in the salad, fried bananas at lunch and more plain and ungarnished bananas at dinner. Our passage down the Congo was marked by a trail of banana skins.

During the eight days’ voyage the true width of the Congo was never seen. Thousands of islands and sandbanks, with narrow shifting channels between, kept the captain on the bridge from dawn until we tied up late at night. Mile after mile of palm and creeper, vine and mangrove, fern and thick green bush as the Michelin splashed down the river. Just before dinner one night we ran aground.

Judging by the shudder and sudden stop we were not merely resting on a sandbank. The Michelin was hard and fast. Violent efforts with the paddle-wheel merely resulted in the stern swinging away from the shore a little. Our engines raced ahead, astern, ahead, astern. In the bows a searchlight had been placed so that the hard-worked engineer and his natives could be seen at the winch in a smother of escaping steam. An anchor with a wire hawser had been laid out. Now our optimists were heaving on the taut wire and hoping that the ship would move before the anchor dragged. They were disappointed. Still we lay alongside a dark and ghostly island, and swarms of real mosquitoes were singing round our lights. Canoes, unseen before the stranding, appeared and carried on a feverish trade in fish,

manioc, tobacco and eggs with the lower deck passengers. At midnight the captain gave his worn-out crew a rest until early morning. The heat of the forest reached out and covered us in humid waves.

An iron boat went over the side at first light. The paddlers towed a thick wire hawser on shore and secured it round a tree trunk. The rattle of the winch was heard again. Slowly, very slowly, the wire came in. You cannot heave a lightly-built river steamer off the sand in a hurry or she may leave her thin keel plates behind. Gradually the ship moved into the deep water of the channel. The captain ordered his breakfast and began to shave.

On the fifth day I was at Coquilhatville, capital of the Province Equatoriale and half-way house between Stanleyville and Kinshasa.

“Coq,” as everyone calls this pretty river town, lies on both sides of the Equator. There is one villa at least in which the dining-room is in the northern hemisphere and the bedroom south of the line. But it was a dull journey after the life and colour of the narrow upper river. I was sorry when the river widened into the large island-strewn lake known as Stanley Pool. Here was Kinshasa, fast becoming the most important town in West Africa. Here were the agents of ocean steamship companies. I was within a few days of the end of my journey through the Congo; weary of incessant heat and bush and river; yearning for the smell of salt water and an ocean liner.

Kinshasa might have been one of the great cities of Africa. The geographical misfortune which made

the Congo impassable for ocean steamers above Matadi doomed Kinshasa to the position of a river port instead of the outlet for the trade of a country almost as large as Europe. So there is a narrow-gauge railway climbing over the Crystal Mountains for two hundred and fifty miles, instead of an inland waterway. Kinshasa is growing in spite of the handicap. Many towns in West Africa give you the impression that the white man is a passing figure in a land unfit for white people. Kinshasa is a notable exception. With its three-storied steel hotel, its solid banks and business houses, large showrooms and gay cafes, Kinshasa is much more than a hastily-built outpost of the tropics.

Sixteen of us in a toy coach on a toy railroad – the last railway journey

during my five-thousand mile passage through the Congo. The friendliest train of all. On the tiny engine were two black drivers, two firemen and a whistler. Then the little baggage car; the open native truck, a second-class coach, and our own narrow first-class coach. We were lurching along between Kinshasa and Matadi at our top speed of fifteen miles an hour. In the arm-chair facing me was a young French official who had travelled from the island of Reunion right across Africa to take up a new post at Pointe Noire. The other fourteen were all French, all courteous and helpful to the stranger in their midst, all full of good humour and the gaiety of their race. Without this merry company the journey would have been tiresome indeed.

There were officers of the French Colonial Infantry, with anchor badges on their khaki uniforms to show they served the Republic overseas. Civilians with silver buttons on their white tunics, I found, were administrators of districts somewhere in the dark heart of the French Congo. There was a man with the moustache and pointed beard so valuable to cartoonists. His girth was immense, and his friends pretended that he was in need of help whenever he moved, and pushed him from seat to seat. There was only one woman – the mother of a dark-eyed, well-behaved little boy who soon revealed himself as a tremendous eater. These travellers had good reason for their light-hearted laughter. For three years they had collected taxes, drilled black troops, garrisoned little frontier posts as far north as Lake

T'chad. They had seen enough sun and palms and sand and they were aching for a glimpse of Paris boulevards. It was early morning when we left Kinshasa. At ten o'clock the mother of the young Frenchman cut up pine-apples and handed a slice to everyone amid a chorus of "Merci bien!" Then the fat man roared "Toto!" A small black boy appeared from the little balcony at the end of the saloon. His master had a box of ice, and invited us all to hand our bottles of warm beer to Toto. During the day Toto was kept busy carrying iced beer and washing plates and glasses.

At eleven o'clock it was time for the "second breakfast." A lieutenant had a cake soaked in brandy. The small boy seized a slice while his parents were not looking. He gulped it down with relish, fiery liquid and all, and

resumed his angelic expression. Cold roast chickens were set out on the little tables, and long, twisted French rolls. At wayside stations we leant out of the windows and bought paw-paws and red oranges with the thin skin of the perfect fruit.

The train crawled up to the cool heights of Thysville in the evening. This is one of the health resorts of the Congo, and I slept without a mosquito net – a relief indeed after many nights of suffocation. But long before dawn the shrieking of the train whistle awakened me. Coffee, cold sausage and rolls and red wine at five in the morning and we were all aboard again. Stocks of beer and ice had been replenished. We were in a mood to appreciate the superb scenery of the Crystal Mountains. This barrier of tawny stone runs all the way from the

Cameroons to Angola, shutting off the coast from the vast central basin of the Congo. The railway follows the old caravan route which Joseph Conrad described in his own masterly way in "Heart of Darkness," an almost faithful narrative of personal experience. Chinese labourers were imported to build the line up and down these steep gradients. They say that one Chinese died for every sleeper laid, and one white engineer for every kilometre of metal.

Sometimes the country is like South Africa, rock-crowned koppies rising out of brown veld and the blue dome of the sky over everything. Then the train gathers speed, and a bush fire crackles on each side of the track, filling the carriages with smoke. A moment later we are in the tropics again, lush greenery of the forest

darkening the windows, gaudy butterflies over mangrove swamps.

It was dark when we reached the enormous gorge through which the Congo finally cuts its way to the sea. There were the lights of Matadi, and with a sudden grip at my heart I saw ocean steamers too. Ocean steamers, with baths and white stewards, soft beds, wide decks where the menacing "ping-ing-ing-zzz" of the mosquitoes is not heard. For weeks I had endured hotels without comfort, meals without nourishment, air so hot and clammy that it was without life. That row of porthole lights at Matadi was, to me, a promise of luxury which I was keen to taste after long Congo travel. I paid off my black porters and stepped into civilisation.

Matadi means rock. It is a fitting name for the chief port of the Belgian Congo, built as it is on layers of sun-scorched rock eighty miles from the sea. When Stanley dynamited a patch for his trek wagons near this place, the astounded natives named him Bula Matadi – the rock-breaker. The Government of the country and all white officials are called Bula Matadi to this day. Shut in by mountains on both sides of the river, Matadi is the hottest town in a land where moist heat is the main impression. Where there is trade, however, white men will risk any climate and any disease. Low-powered ships steaming up to Matadi were often beaten back by the strong current when they reached a difficult corner known as the “Cauldron” just below Matadi. Vessels have shattered their bows on the threatening cliffs.

Our Scandinavian pilot takes us safely past the danger spot, and Noki, the Portuguese settlement on the Congo, appears ahead. A few white-walled houses and tin sheds, no boats or steamers, a road climbing up the mountains into the interior, not a living being – that is Noki as I saw it. Probably a political outpost rather than an essential river port.

As we follow a mail steamer down the river, the *Asie* comes abreast of a floating dock with a warning in huge letters: “The most terrible enemy to the progress of this country is the mosquito.” But for us there will be only such mosquitoes as we encounter at ports of call. We are bound for France.

I am helping myself to a superb omelette at lunch when everyone stops eating and jumps out of his chair.

There is a rasping and scraping, followed by an alarming series of bumps. The ship stops dead. When a large ocean liner piles herself up on a sandbank there is trouble ahead; so we finish lunch hurriedly and go on deck. Our little grey motor-launch is taking soundings while our wireless calls for help. The propellers thrash the water, but we remain on the sand, heeling steeply.

Suction dredgers and tugs arrive. They toil round us without moving the great bulk of the liner. A kedge anchor is taken out, and the boats carrying it capsize under the strain. Fourteen men fighting for life in the swiftly-running Congo. Lifebuoys splashing into the water. Ropes flung over the side. The motor-launch picks them up one by one.

Our winches rattled busily as huge timber logs were lifted from the holds to lighten the ship. In the great estuary of the Congo there are many little creeks which the slavers used when they were pursued by gun-boats, but only two main passages can be taken by large ships, and the dredgers cannot keep more than one open at a time. It was this vital waterway that the Asie was blocking. Fierce efforts were made to move us. The dredgers all sucked together. In the end there was a little movement, a steady sliding off the sand, and in five minutes we were in deep water.

Port Gentil, one of the first West African ports of call, is one of those places where the white residents take possession of a liner and forget their exile for a night. They came on board at six that evening; sun-tanned

Frenchmen with the ribbons of their decorations in the button-holes of their white dinner jackets; vivacious women flocking into the hairdresser's shop for shingles, crops and waves, a new pair of stockings, a bottle of perfume. The sun goes over the horizon like a lamp dropped into water; and then the smoking-room is filled with our visitors, and many "Sauvage" cocktails are shaken in the bar. A bugle sounds and, as chattering and laughing they stroll towards the dining-saloon, I realize that even in Port Gentil a Frenchwoman can be very smart indeed.

These French people have the gift of forgetting their surroundings in the gaiety of the moment. Here on this steaming African coast their food is the interminable chicken, condensed milk, olives, and sardines, melting

tinned butter. Dinner, iced champagne, dancing – exquisite. For a night they are back in Paris. It is, I am told, a common experience to find one or two men asleep in a cabin when the ship proceeds to sea. They are disembarked at the next port.

At midnight they leave us, cherishing the memory of their respite from Africa until the next Chargeurs Reunis liner calls in a fortnight's time.

I am no linguist, and for a time I was a little lonely on board the *Asie*. The man from Reunion spoke English, and in desperation I began learning French, but this friendly traveller left the ship at Point Noire and then I could talk only to the busy purser. I raced through the surf in huge canoes with that purser at many places where the *Asie* anchored. After a time four British traders joined the ship. Then

the time passed more quickly. I was in the “Sud Express” from Bordeaux to Paris. I was in Fleet Street again. I was surveying Manhattan from the Woolworth tower. All too soon I was going out on another story for the evening paper in Cape Town.

See that you live fully in each happy moment, my friends. Remember the inscription on the sundial in an old-world garden: “It is later than you think.”

CHAPTER 9

SOUTH AFRICAN WILDERNESS

EVERY REPORTER cherishes a memory of some favourite story he has covered for his newspaper. My diary leaves me in no doubt on this point. I have looked back on thousands, and I can find nothing to rival the Verneuk Pan episode for excitement, pleasure and satisfaction.

You may have forgotten the very name of Verneuk Pan now, but once – in the peaceful, pre-depression year of 1929 – it appeared in all the world's headlines. Verneuk Pan was the remote and desolate spot in Bushmanland where Captain Malcolm Campbell made his attempt on the world land speed record. It seems ridiculous now, all the effort and the money that was spent, now that the

shouting and the tumult has gone without an echo. But at the time ...

It started when a country doctor wrote to a Cape Town morning newspaper suggesting that the flat sun-baked waste in the heart of Bushmanland known as Verneuk Pan might be used as a racing track. Letters like that often go into the basket, but this one caught the eye of Desmond Young.

Desmond Young had taken up journalism as an afterthought. He had a distinguished army career in the First Great War; and then, as the son of a famous marine salvage expert, he had gone into salvage without any sea training and made a small fortune. He used to sail with me on Table Bay, and tell me stories of those great days. Long afterwards he embodied all these powerful narratives and rich anecdotes in a book called "Ship Ashore." He

left South Africa to become editor of the "Pioneer" in India. (Of course he had spent the small fortune). I last met him at Shephard's in Cairo on Christmas Eve, 1941. He was a lieutenant-colonel in the Indian Army, and not long afterwards he was captured in the Western Desert. He deserved a better fate, but his ingenuity did not forsake him and he escaped to Switzerland.

Well, the letter was read by Desmond Young, and was carefully considered. Desmond drove secretly to Verneuk Pan, and decided that the idea was worth cabling to Campbell. At that time Campbell was discontented with Daytona Beach and was looking for a new track. As a result of Desmond Young's information, Campbell put his Bluebird on board ship and came to South Africa.

Campbell inspected Verneuk Pan. This weird saucer in the wilderness is a freak of nature which geologists find it difficult to explain. There are thousands of "pans" scattered over the dry parts of South Africa. Wind action may have caused these shallow depressions; or possibly they were flattened by glaciers. Verneuk is the largest "pan" in Bushmanland, twenty miles long by nine miles wide. It appears to have a billiard-table surface, and the ordinary motorist can press hard down on the accelerator and let go the wheel. Campbell, however, soon discovered technical difficulties. The "pan" was covered with millions of tiny flints capable of bursting the Bluebird's thin tyres. Weeks were spent clearing a track eleven miles in length, and the work cost thousands of pounds.

During the period of preparation I flew to Verneuk Pan with Captain Dick Bentley, an enterprising taxi-pilot, in an open two seat "Moth." I still have the little notebook in which we exchanged messages. Bentley, finding his engine running well and a strong wind astern, steered on a compass course over one of the wickedest mountain ranges I have ever seen from the air. The "Moth" swayed and bumped in pockets that dropped us a thousand feet in two minutes. Looking down on those grey, grim heights, I could see that there was hardly room for a vulture to land. The safety belt kept tightening round my chest, and I thought of the day when Frank Solomon had shouted: "Hold tight!" If the engine failed this time there would be no reprieve.

Bentley tapped my back and handed me the first note. "Petrol not coming through properly. Taps are in your cockpit. See what you can do."

I shivered and fumbled gently with the taps. Then I drew a little picture of the taps and scribbled a note to Bentley. "Which one do I turn, and which way?" I was afraid that I might cut off the supply completely. We were clearing the mountain tops by a few hundred feet, and there would have been no time for the engine to pick up again.

The notebook came back with little arrows pointing, and again I adjusted the taps with trembling fingers. I must have done some good, for we reached open country safely and came down on the first clear space to overhaul the petrol system. The rest of the flight to

Verneuk Pan was easy, but I had not finished with that “Moth.”

Some days before the attempt on the record I set out by road with Carel Birkby as my assistant. (Carel was a junior reporter in those days, but he soon became a vivid writer and he was an outstanding figure among the war correspondents in Abyssinia and the Middle East). Neville Clayton was our photographer. On arrival at Verneuk we joined forces with Gordon Makepiece and a party from the Johannesburg newspaper owned by our firm. Bentley arrived to fly our pictures back to town, so that we had three fast cars and the “Moth” lined up at the edge of our camp.

Our old friend Desmond Young had set up camp with a fence round it, and Campbell lived there. The fence was intended to keep rival newspapermen

out. Desmond Young had organised the whole great enterprise, and he intended to have the whole story.

Verneuk Pan, as I have indicated, is a long way from civilisation. Before the first race, however, it had become a boom town under canvas. You could buy French champagne at the bars, water cost eighteen shillings a barrel, petrol nearly five shillings a gallon. The sun scorched us by day, and sudden dust storms drove us into our tents. At night the temperature fell almost to freezing point. Bold rats came visiting us in search of food, so that every man sat in the mess-tent with a beer-bottle in his hand, ready to lash out.

One evening the subject of night flying was raised, and Bentley declared that he could take-off and land on the wide surface of Verneuk

Pan without the aid of flares. I had been washing the most recent dust storm from my throat that night, and foolishly remarked "I'll come with you." Just before midnight we bolted the "Moth's" folding wings in position, ran up the engine, taxied out and raced off into the air. It was not the cold that made my knees knock together in the front cockpit. The exhaust glowed red-hot in the darkness.

Over Campbell's tents seven miles away zoomed the "Moth," bringing Campbell and Desmond Young out at the double. Somehow Bentley landed in the deceptive moonlight. I would cheerfully have walked the seven miles back to my own camp, but I went inside with the others to receive hospitality. Campbell, an old pilot himself, seemed a little doubtful about

this escapade. They all came out to watch the take-off, and I climbed in feeling that I would rather have driven the Bluebird down the track. Bentley showed his skill again, however, and brought the "Moth" down with hardly a bump. I lost all taste for stunt flying that night.

South Africa displayed intense interest in Campbell's attempts on the record, and day after day we filled the main news pages of our newspapers with the latest stories from Verneuk Pan. Working as a team, we scored beat after beat with news and pictures. Desmond Young had started with everything in his favour, but Verneuk Pan proved that a news monopoly is difficult to maintain. I am not going to describe how it was done, for I may have to face the same situation again one day. But our mess-tent was the

most popular spot on Verneuk Pan, and our expense sheet made the manager wince when we returned. Nevertheless, he admitted that it was worth it. One meal, I remember, consisted of bully beef, biscuits and Pommery.

Campbell failed, of course, and at the end of one attempt when he had done his utmost and reached only 218 miles an hour I stood behind him and strained my ears to catch any chance remark which might be expanded into an "interview." I heard Campbell say: "Well, she's been a good old 'bus, but I'm afraid she's had her day." He added some technical reason for his failure which I tried to memorise. Then I hurried off to write my piece.

A few days later my newspaper arrived at Verneuk Pan, and Campbell sent for me. He was in an extremely

angry mood, and it appeared that my description of the intricate Bluebird engine had offended him.

When he was a little calmer I collected my wits. "Captain Campbell," I said, "you ought to realise that I never did know anything about engines."

"What do you mean?"

"You've probably forgotten the incident, but eleven years ago, at Denham School of Aeronautics, you examined me in engines and I failed. Well, there has been no improvement since."

He laughed at that, and we had a drink together. Owing to Seagrave's success at Daytona while Campbell was in South Africa, the Verneuk Pan affair was really a gigantic and costly fiasco. I went back there long afterwards, thinking of the old drama, the crowded

days and riotous nights. There were too many ghosts in the mirage, and even the dust was alive with memories.

I have made many journeys through the lonely territory to the north and west of Verneuk Pan. These are the least-known districts of South Africa – Great Bushmanland, Kenhardt, Gordonia and Namaqualand – the lands of the canvas water bag, the trek Boer and the dust-devil, far from the tourist routes.

My maps of the North-West Cape, stained with the dust of thousands of miles of travel, are open before me. Here are some of the hottest roads in the world.

North-West roads, lined with Bushman grass, the “twaa grass” that crackles in the wind. Roads dominated

by strange koppies where, in the caves, Bushmen once lived. Aching roads that stretch away in full view, ten, twenty, thirty miles, like the long road to Pofadder. Roads that cross huge pans; mud pans, salt pans and dried-up vleis where the speedometer needle creeps up and the tyres hum to the tune of ninety miles an hour. High speeds fit the mood of the North-West, where distances and everything else are on the grand scale. There are farms measured in hundreds of thousands of acres; too small in times of drought. A dust storm in the North-West does not merely blow sand in your eyes; it comes in whirling masses that shut out the sun for fifteen minutes, while in the village lamps are lit.

These were the roads that led me at last to the northern borders of the Cape, the Orange River, greatest river

in South Africa. Down the thousand miles of the Orange there sweeps much more than floods and flotsam. Old secrets, mysteries, treasure, weird legends – all these go down to where the river breaks through the burning desert coast at last into the South Atlantic.

Long stretches of the lower river are still inaccessible and unexplored. But mapped or unmapped, every mile of this winding gash across the sub-continent holds some memory of stirring adventure, riches found or lost, escape or death. A wild story it is, of the early navigators who came to the river by sea; of the elephant hunters from the south, the freebooters and robbers, brown and white, the missionaries, the farmers, and those sun-dried salamanders, the prospectors. Restless souls, seeking the

treasure of one kind or another which is found only in the remote places of the earth. This is the story the Orange River holds – these men and the strange things they found and are still finding.

I saw the mouth of the Orange River once from the deck of the Ingerid. The deep blue of the sea changed to light green; and through the binoculars I watched the rollers curling white across the sandy bar. Around the calm lagoons beyond, the air was dark with a horde of birds, wild geese and duck, gulls, pelicans and pink flamingos. Years ago you might have heard the deep booming calls of a herd of hippo in this lagoon. The last hippo has now been shot.

Only from hearsay, from Bushman tales and camp-fire yarns, can we gather the wild story of the Orange

River and the strange part of South Africa through which it passes. Tempting scraps of lore and legend – little more do we know. Along nearly all the world's great waterways it is possible to search the records for centuries, note the floods of the past and predict with some certainty how often the torrents of the future may be expected. But the Orange River has a past darker than her own muddy waters. The “Groot Rivier” of the voortrekkers is a river of mystery.

The time will come when train-loads of tourists will go North from Cape Town every year to see the Orange River, the islands, the Great Falls and the Kalahari. Yet it was only in 1760 that the first white man, Jacobus Coetsee, saw and crossed the Orange. An elephant hunter was this Coetsee, and the tale of discovery he told

brought the explorers, Colonel Gordon and Lieutenant Paterson, to eat hippo meat on the river banks seventeen years later. From the early years right down to the end of last century, however, the long wagon-trek to the Orange was a difficult and dangerous undertaking. The yarns they told around the outspan fires in Bushmanland in those days were of encounters with wild animals and hostile savages. They were true yarns.

Settlers began the cultivation of the rich Orange River silt just before the end of the last century. For hundreds of miles, however, the course of the river remained unmapped and unknown. It was only thirty years ago that Mr. A. D. Lewis, Director of Irrigation, made a hard trek from Ramans Drift down to the mouth in twelve days. He visited Hottentots

camp where few white men had ever been seen before, and noted the gluttony of these remote people. They would eat a goat at a sitting. They begged for tobacco, and smoked feverishly until their supplies vanished.

Only when the dramas of a heavy flood are related in the newspapers do many people in South Africa become aware of the Orange River Islands. No one, as far as I know, has ever counted these long, bushy obstructions in the river bed. Every flood sees islands torn apart, new islands formed. Cannon Island, for example, was eleven miles long; it has been rent asunder, much of the best soil washed away, and has now become a series of smaller islands. And so it is impossible to say how many isles exist in the weird loops of the Orange. There must be

hundreds. About twenty miles below Upington, where the river opens out into a great bowl, the islands are scattered generously like germs seen through a microscope. Here, too, is an island with a name which gives a vivid impression of this water jungle. Drakenbosch Island, they call it; and it is not hard to imagine a dragon prowling in that tangle of wild olives and willows, mimosa, zwartbosch, ebony and thorn.

No wonder the brave little commandos of farmers found it so difficult to punish the Hottentot and Koranna raiders, who made their strongholds in those river islands for a hundred years. The bush gave a secure hiding place for stolen cattle. White renegades, criminals from the Cape, joined the marauding bands which used the islands as their base.

German settlers to the north of the Orange were raided too – men, women and children murdered in the sudden raids by the river bandits on isolated farms. Organised military campaigns cleared the river at last. You may still find rusty rifles, food tins and skeletons in the wild country of the lower river, relics of the long guerrilla war. Not until 1906 was the last robber chief captured.

Both sides of the river were British territory, even when the German ruled South-West Africa. The German outposts, however, were built close to the stream; and the soldiers grew fruit, fished in the river, and made pets of monkeys and baboons. Lonely they were, but it must have been a happy change from life in barracks. Some of the international frontier signs, with “British Territory” on one side and

“Deutsches Schutzgebiet” on the other, still stand in remote fastness’s of the river, though few white men, apart from policemen and prospectors, have seen them since they were erected by the boundary commission years ago.

Upington, chief town of the vast district of Gordonia, is the gateway both to the river and the Kalahari desert. Westwards from Upington, all the way to the Great Falls, the banks are intensely cultivated. It is said that the farms along this great frontage were laid out by allowing each settler to ride for half-an-hour along the river, and then for two and a half hours straight inland. A glance at the irrigation map certainly shows a line of long narrow farms; though many have been sub-divided since those spacious days. The contrast between

the green vineyards, waterwheels and shady cottages of the river, and the sheer desert to be found on the same farm, is often startling. A few minutes after leaving the greenery of Kakamas village you enter a veritable Death Valley where only the grim Kokerboom grows.

If only the Orange River were navigable! Sailors of four hundred adventurous years and more have regretted the fact that ships cannot enter the Orange River. Bold Diaz left a store ship with nine men anchored near the mouth as far back as 1487. When he returned months later all but one man had disappeared; and it is recorded that the survivor died of joy at the sight of his comrades. These were the first white soldiers of fortune to perish at the whim of the dark river god.

The Orange River mouth remains closed to shipping. Mr. Lewis rode across the sandy barrier from South African to German territory in 1912 without wetting his horse's feet. Usually the great muddy stream, breaks through the bar; but nowhere is there a passage where even a rowing boat can enter in safety. Away inland, where the sharp teeth of aching black mountains jut into the sky, there are old rich copper mines and deposits of almost every known mineral awaiting development. River transport would make many of them payable. But it is difficult. They are cut off by grim wastes of rock and sand the south.

Diamonds are another story. They are exquisitely transportable; they need no railways. But of all the precious minerals sought by man, the storehouse of the diamond has been

most difficult to find. Those ill-fated soldiers of Diaz must have walked over the gravel terraces at Alexander Bay which are yielding great fortunes today. Colonel Gordon, the explorer who named the river in honour of his employer, the Prince of Orange, camped near the spot. Sir James Alexander, who worked copper mines up the river more than a century ago, built a hut to trade with the Hottentots right on top of a “pocket” of diamonds worth millions. The late Fred Cornell, one of the most famous prospectors in South Africa, predicted the great discovery in his books and articles. He followed legends and rumours of diamonds along the Orange for years, often at risk of his life, only to miss the Aladdin’s Cave at Alexander Bay by a few hundred yards.

A freak of fortune placed the great hoard in the hands of a scientist, Dr. Hans Merensky, in January, 1927. A few weeks later he was a millionaire. Then the State stepped in. Barbed wire fences, searchlights, machine-guns and a force of armed police guarded the treasure-chest. This seizure of the fabulously rich diggings near the mouth of the Orange River almost caused a revolution among the disappointed, desperate hordes of men who had hurried from every corner of South Africa to share the spoil.

The diamonds from this area were superb – the world had never seen their like before. Some of the rough diamonds are so pure and beautiful that they have the appearance of cut stones.

Here was a strong temptation for the hungry legion outside the barbed wire

fence. Hundreds took the risk. An enormous traffic in "I.D.B.," illicit diamond buying, began; a traffic which will continue until the last diamonds are taken from the sun-baked soil of Namaqualand. At one time so many stolen diamonds were flung on the markets of Amsterdam and Antwerp that the control of the world's diamond trade was threatened. Men employed on the State diggings swallowed diamonds, or hid them in cuts in their flesh, in sticks of shaving soap and the heels of their boots. An X-ray plant was installed at the Alexander Bay camp; but human ingenuity surpasses every effort of the authorities to detect smuggling. Parcels of smuggled diamonds left South Africa every week. In New York, London and Amsterdam it is not a crime to be in possession of an uncut

stone. The three mile limit is the end of the arm of the South African law – the law that runs on the fog-bound coast of Namaqualand.

Whence came these magnificent diamonds? From the Orange River, undoubtedly. Some believe that among the grotesque maze of mountain peaks below the Great Falls of the Orange River there is a crater of diamonds; that the diamonds move slowly down a pipe, year after year, to the river bed and are carried down to the sea. I have waited, in a remote part of Bushmanland, for the return of an airman who flew over this area in search of the crater that no man has ever seen. He found nothing but a ghastly, waterless Switzerland where a forced landing would have meant death among the sharp rocks that fringe the river. A companion of

Cornell named Ransson, climbing in quest of this same castle of treasure, once found himself in a narrow gorge surrounded by baboons. They sat round staring at him, eyes shining green in the darkness, a savage council of death. One shot or false move, and the baboons would have attacked. Ransson lit his pipe. After minutes of suspense the baboon leader slouched away, followed by the tribe.

There is a legend that the “Wonder Hole” or “Bottomless Pit” is the source of the diamonds. You need a Hottentot guide to reach this mysterious hole in the ground in a far corner of the little-known Richtersveld; and natives are reluctant to guide expeditions to the spot. They believe the deep, black cavern is the home of the “Grootslang,” the Great Snake of the Orange River.

The cavern, they say, is connected with the sea forty miles away. If you lean over the edge of the pit and listen carefully, there comes at intervals a deep boom like surf on a distant shore. I know one tough prospector who took a winch and cable to the spot and explored a little of the “Wonder Hole”. He is, I believe, the only man to attempt this feat. It was dark and extremely hot when his feet touched a ledge far down. The ragged circle of daylight seemed small. Bats flew in his face, and he dropped his electric torch. Before they hauled him to the surface he observed tunnels leading out of the shaft. There was a smell of sulphur in the air. He never descended again.

The “Great Snake” of the Orange River is something more than a legend. Cornell described it in his

books. Scores of other men living near the river have sent letters to the newspapers declaring they had seen the monster. Native stories that the snake has enormous diamonds in the eye-sockets, and that a strange and evil influence is felt by all who behold it, may be politely dismissed. White eye-witnesses state that the snake is forty feet long, leaving a track on the muddy river banks about three feet wide. This spoor was followed by one party of prospectors for many miles before it disappeared into the river. The truth probably is that exceptionally large pythons have been seen in the river from time to time, and their sizes exaggerated. Pythons up to twenty-five feet in length have been shot; their powers of swallowing a buck whole are well known. But in the

native mind there remains only one Great Snake, greatly feared.

Another legendary home of the snake, and also a reputed source of diamonds, is the swirling pool below the King George Cataract at the Aughrabies Falls – the “Great Falls” of the Orange River. These falls, eighty miles below the town of Upington, are higher than the Victoria Falls; but the impression they leave on the visitor is sinister rather than beautiful. They were discovered more than a century ago by George Thompson, a Cape Town merchant travelling for pleasure. At that time the surrounding country was a wonderland of big game. There were herds of giraffe and hippo in the deep pools. Today the long-tailed monkeys still scramble in the trees; but the great beasts have vanished before the crack of the rifle.

You can hear the thunder of the muddy torrents pouring over the granite rocks as you trudge painfully over rough veld and through streams towards the Falls from the southern side. During the rainy season, when the Orange is in full flood, the Falls are inaccessible. Only an airman can view the scene then. A guide is always necessary, for the huge rocks are so smooth that there is no foothold for a goat, and a stranger might plunge to death in the fearful chasm below the Falls.

A rusty diamond-washing machine and heaps of gravel near the Falls' gorge recall the efforts of one syndicate to test the Aughrabies legend. It is not improbable, after all, that a great wealth of diamonds rests in the bed of the gorge, flung down there by the floods of centuries. No

one but a diver could reach them, however, and I doubt whether the river will ever be quiet enough at this place to allow such salvage. The Great Snake's hoard is well guarded.

Such is the Orange River, winding through mysterious country, watched by strange and lonely people, haunted by the ghosts of elephant hunters and long vanished mammoths; phantom regiments and commandos, British, Boer and German; and the shades of sun tortured prospectors who died under those purple mountains before they found their El Dorado.

South of the Orange River, south for hundreds of miles to the mud houses of Brandvlei and the white buildings of Calvinia, stretches the wilderness of Bushmanland. A great hush rested over these plains and koppies sixty

years ago. The land was unoccupied then, save by the wandering trek-boer. It is a lonely country still, even though you may see a telegraph line, a store or farmhouse here and there.

Bushmanland is still the territory of the trek-boer, a type you will find in no other part of South Africa. Across the wide spaces, like sails on a hot, brown ocean, move the wagons of these restless people. To see them, as I did on those distant, burning roads, is to see again the voortrekkers of old. These wagon folk hear little of the feverish world beyond the Kamiesberg and the Hantam Mountains. They have their bibles, but not wireless sets. Their children are born and brought up under the canvas wagon tents; many of them have never seen a town. At the farm called Bladgrond, in the heart of Bushmanland, I met a group of women

wearing the loose print dresses and bright "kappies" of last century. Fine complexions they all had, too, in this land of intense, dry heat.

In the past, few trek-boers owned land. Nowadays, when Crown lands have shrunk and pasturage must be paid for with sheep, most of them have a piece of veld somewhere on the borders of Bushmanland. Often for two years at a time, however, a man in this country is compelled to abandon his drought-stricken farm and set out on the endless quest for grass. I doubt whether there is a farm in Bushmanland large enough to support its sheep when the summer rains fall.

So the trekkers are nomads by compulsion and by instinct. You find them in the most desolate places, always a mile or two ahead of their flocks, always enquiring what grazing

they may expect further along the road. A hundred disappointments do not seem to break their spirit – the distance is always alluring. I remember a wagon outspanned beside the sand-choked Goodhouse road, in a waterless valley of stark, blinding heat. There were two little girls playing with the lambs; a woman in the heavily loaded wagon; three men searching the horizon for signs of moisture. They asked for water and we gave them the canvas bag and some melons. Most of their sheep had perished. They were trekking on, still full of hope.

In the good times, when summer thunderstorms fill the pans and the grass rustles high and yellow in the wind, the trek-Boer's life is not unpleasant. Few Orange River settlers, with their rich irrigated gardens, can

hope to increase their capital as quickly as the owner of thousands of sheep. But the winters, when the grass turns black and then disappears – each winter is an ordeal. At all times the rainfall is freakish. I have passed within a few hours' motoring in Bushmanland from gay stretches of flowers to desert belts where no rain, it seemed, had refreshed the earth for years.

Yes, the long winters mean torture in Bushmanland. Then the trek-boer must dig in shallow depressions where water is sometimes retained by the underlying rock. Cup by cup the salty water is scooped out – donkeys, mules, sheep in pitiful anticipation waiting for their share.

The trek-boer sometimes stakes his own life, and the lives of all in the wagon, on his ability to find the

hidden water. A broken wheel, straying donkeys, such little mishaps may spell death in the worst parts of Bushmanland. In the northern areas the red dunes of the Kalahari have crept across the river; and in this fine, dry sand the mummified bodies of horses, and men too, have been found.

When all goes well the day starts with prayers and coffee. Bread is a luxury – there are boer biscuits in the wagon. Seldom is there a shortage of fresh meat, for one lamb will not be missed from the flock. The hen-coop which you see swinging from every wagon supplies eggs. But the trek-boers lack fruit and fresh vegetables. The water they drink is so brackish that few city people could swallow it unless they were very thirsty. A few of those marvellous mixtures known as “old Dutch Medicines,” and a still more

powerful physique, make the trek-boer independent of doctors. One hesitates to think of serious illness in the remote places where the trek-boers spend their lives.

No official notice of the Bushmanland trek-boers was taken until 1891, when the late Mr. W. C. Scully, the South African author (then a magistrate) was sent out to compile a census. At that time the plains were alive with millions of springbok; during a recent tour I saw only one. Every year, in early winter, the springbok migrated from east to west across Bushmanland. It must have been one of the greatest sights in Africa – this stampede of millions that raised a dust cloud as far as the eye could see and left the whole surface of the country torn up by their hoofs. Naturalists cannot explain this strange herd instinct with any

certainly. It has been suggested that the buck were anxious to reach the vegetation on the slopes of the western mountains; the fawns were born in early winter, and the does would require green food. Many years ago, soon after the first trek-boers arrived, the most startling migration of all occurred. The springbok hordes appeared to have been gripped by a devastating thirst. They broke across the boundaries of Bushmanland and dashed clear through the coastal regions of Namaqualand to the sea. A springbok usually drinks nothing. But there, on the white sands, these millions drank salt water until they perished, so that the beaches were piled high with skeletons.

The springbok stampede caused such havoc on the farms of the Bushmanland border that the Cape

Government issued rifles and ammunition for the farmers to protect their crops. Then the migration became a massacre. Even the young boys were armed. One shot fired into that dense herd brought down three buck. Old flint-locks barked side by side with Martinis. Wagon after wagon returned creaking under the weight of the kill. Those were busy nights for the women who made the biltong, with thousands of buck to split, remove the bones, cut into strips, salt and dry. Today they must shoot the great paaus, the wild bustard from the Kalahari when they wish to make biltong.

Bushmanland often seems lifeless; but all manner of queer creatures shelter underground by day, waiting for sundown. Near the river the tarantulas will drive a man from his camp-fire.

There are scorpions under every rock, and snakes that dare not crawl in the burning sun. Meerkats stand erect, then hurry into their holes as a motor-car passes. Leopards and jackals stalk their prey in the krantzes; and above, the lammervanger awaits a share of the offal.

The remains of more ancient creatures than any of these have been discovered in Bushmanland – nothing less, indeed, than the bones of a dinosaur. They were first noticed by a Mr. Coetzee while sinking a well on the farm Kangnas, in a valley leading to the Orange River. Dr. Rogers took charge of the excavation and brought a calcified tooth, a femora, hind leg bones and fragments of vertebrae to the surface. There must be many more such relics of Cretaceous times in the buried valleys of Bushmanland.

All the birds and beasts, even the snakes and scorpions, were hunted by the wizened little men who gave Bushmanland their name. Their skulls are to be found under the sand in every cave.

I saw a row of them, and many arrow-heads, pottery and bone hunting-knives collected by a store-keeper who felt the magic of this vanished race. At the water-holes in Bushmanland you will see grooves in the rocks where the Bushmen sharpened their weapons. Buried in the sands are the ostrich eggs they filled with water long ago; but these secret places, marked with Bushman signs, we may find only by chance. There was a death penalty then for the Bushman who stole the precious water belonging to another clan.

Thus Bushmen and springbok have departed – both so destructive that they could not live in the same country as the white man. The great solitude has been claimed by the trek-boer. I do not envy him; not even when the rains have come and the face of a suffering land is transformed.

But I should like to see a dawn again in Bushmanland, the air so fresh and clear that purple mountains fifty miles away seem close at hand. One knows hunger and thirst on the aching roads of Bushmanland and the enjoyment of satisfying them at the end of a long day's run. Ah, the calm nights of Bushmanland when the temperature outside calls for nothing more than a sheet. I hope to see the lightning on the white walls of Pofadder, the old meeting place of the trek-boers, again one day. The smell of rain-lashed

earth, the thin music of a Hottentot “ramkee,” the empty circle of veld under the blue bowl of the sky ... there is peace in Bushmanland.

Along these hot frontiers grow the weird succulent plants which botanical gardens and private collectors in the United States are eager to secure. They are fascinating, these rare and little known plants of the desert. The lure of discovery is still there; the patient seeker may still find his name Latinised for a new species.

I made a long motor trek in search of succulents with my friend Reay Smithers, the South African desert traveller, hunter and botanist. Together we penetrated the wilderness, crossed the Orange River to scour the southern territory of South-West Africa, visited the Namib Desert in the north and

touched the fringe of the Kalahari. We heard the baboons barking at night as we lay on our blankets under the koppies where no man, perhaps, had ever slept before. It was an adventure, this search for the leathery mimics of the plant world – the growing things that resemble stones and nuts, the rank-smelling stapelias, and the larger tree forms such as the “half-mens.”

One memorable night we camped near the Orange River. It was intensely dark. We ate our biltong and made the coffee by the lights of the car; but of the surrounding veld we could see nothing. The rising moon woke me, and then I saw a sight like an army marching over the hill close by, ghostly figures silhouetted against the yellow moon. I touched Reay. He stared, and told me the legend of the “half-mens,” the strange trees that

grow nowhere else in the world but in this inaccessible territory.

“The Hottentots say that a foreign and mysterious people once crossed the Orange River and invaded this land,” declared Reay Smithers. “They died of thirst, and from the bones of each family grew these trees that look so much like humans – with something missing – when you see them like this under the moon. The head of the flower on each trunk points always to the north, as though the lost spirits were striving to return to their homeland.”

The *Pachypodium namaquanum*, as the scientists call the “halfmens,” was discovered a century ago by the explorer Paterson. It was in flower at the time of our journey; and I believe our photographs of the flowers were the first ever taken. People who had

lived on the edge of the Richtersveld for many years told us they had never seen a tree in flower. Rain may not fall once in five years in that desolate region. The "half-mens," it is estimated from the rate of growth of seeds, takes hundreds of years to reach its greatest height of eight feet. The fleshy, branchless trunk, almost the girth of a man in the middle, is covered with fierce thorns and crowned with green leaves. Not until 1911 were specimens ever seen in Cape Town; but in that year the late Fred Cornell brought two "half-mens" trees back to civilisation with him.

The Richtersveld is a land of stony wastes and granite mountains, with little settlements at the rare springs, gardens where the ground is fertile, red sand where it is dry, euphorbia and acacia, and aching distances marked

out by whitening skeletons. "Hot and empty and dangerous," as a police officer told us before we entered. "See you come out alive!"

Among the nomads of the Richtersveld are some of the last pure Hottentots to be found in South Africa, a new type which has almost vanished. Early last century there were, perhaps, two thousand of them; but many moved on across the Orange River, leaving a small tribe of degraded people, about 500 souls according to the latest estimates. No census has ever been taken. The Richtersveld people are shy and remote, paying no taxes, seldom coming into contact with the Government. There were only three white men living in the territory at the time of our visit.

An aged Hottentot who came to me begging for tea, tobacco and meat was

typical of the Richtersveld people and their poverty. This shivering man in rags declared that he had been living on rock-rabbits, wild honey and roots; and when food was very scarce, snakes and even scorpions, the food of the baboon. Some of the people had goats, he said, and they could live on the milk. In the summer they were all forced to trek to the Orange River, where the goats could feed in the jungle along the banks. Inland, there were only a few places where a man could survive through the hot season.

Water is nearly always an urgent need, and constant movements from rock-hole to mountain spring are imperative. At one spot the only water to be found for miles is held, after rain, by depressions in the tops of two huge granite boulders. The first boulder may be climbed fairly easily;

but the second is reached by a long jump across, at the risk of a fatal fall. Several Hottentots who failed to reach the second boulder lie buried at the base of these sinister rocks.

Deserted huts litter the trails of the Richtersveld. The pasture of tufted grass has not kept pace with the appetites of the people, the little herds of goats are dwindling, and there are few left of the ancient Hottentot breed of sheep. Game is still fairly plentiful, however, and when the owners of Martini Henry and Snider rifles possess the means of barter they visit Port Nolloth for ammunition. Water-hen, fresh from the river, and in lean times gum from thorn trees sometimes vary the monotonous diet of goat's milk and Bushman scraps.

One clan of Richtersveld Hottentots lived for many years at the Orange

River mouth, on the very site of the present State Diamond diggings. Those two ill-fated traders, Peacock and Alexander, built a stone store. There the kitchen middens, graves, and queer rock chippings of the Hottentots are still to be found. There, too, Colonel Gordon in 1779 met a party of eleven Strandlopers. The meeting is interesting because it is the only occasion ever recorded on which a white man set eyes on members of this extinct race of beachcombers, men lower than the Bushman. Possibly the Strandloper strain may still linger in the Richtersveld.

Men like the wizened Hottentots I met might, if their brains were not so feeble, solve the problem that has baffled ethnologists. Are the Hottentots a pure race, or the result of cross-breeding with the Bushman

centuries ago? In the Richtersveld, almost untouched by European civilisation, the answer may yet be found. But it will be a long and tedious study, for when a Richtersveld Hottentot has replied to a few questions the light fades from his sun-weary eyes and he is exhausted.

Kuboos and Lekkersing are now the main settlements in the Richtersveld. At Kuboos a large stone church and missionary's house, built by the Rhenish Mission Society, were abandoned in 1914. Fifteen years later a Government official found everything exactly as the German family left it – pictures, clocks, furniture, a razor and strop, dusty but untouched. Apparently the Hottentots had never entered the house. Stealing is unknown in the Richtersveld; if you

leave a valuable possession on the veld it remains until you return.

Probably the first white man to enter the Richtersveld was Sir James Alexander, who mined copper at Kodash and Numees a century ago and brought the ore down to the river mouth in boats. A "lost mine" worked by Alexander was rediscovered in recent years by Mr. E. Heyes, a prospector. This Was the Eagle Eye Mine in the extreme north of the Richtersveld, fourteen days by wagon from the coast. Heyes found two shafts and a ruined house, with the initials "J.A. 1838" chiselled on a quartz slab. A portion of a ship's mast lay close by. Wagon tracks left a hundred years previously were still visible.

Among the early Richtersveld traders was a man named Cloete, and the "Corporal" or Chief of the Hottentots

at the time of my visit was Jasper Cloete, 73 years old. "Ryk" Jasper, they called him "Rich" Jasper because he owned more goats than any other Hottentot, and was reputed to hold the secret to a buried hoard of gold. He lived at the little settlement of Lekkersing, where there is a school. Some time ago Jasper came under the sinister influence of a Griqua agitator; and there is no doubt that, as a result, armed men from the Richtersveld joined the Bondelswarts in their rebellion against the government in South-West Africa in 1922.

Nevertheless, the Richtersveld people give the authorities beyond their borders no trouble as a rule. They have not the energy to be troublesome. Activity is frowned upon, and even the few patches of soil which once were cultivated are now being abandoned.

They share their food, but they possess little more than their goats, cooking pots and sheepskin coverings. Tea and tobacco are their greatest luxuries. The traveller in the Richtersveld can obtain almost any service in exchange for these things.

The Richtersveld lies within the limits of both summer and winter rains. It may receive both, but more often it receives neither – a desperate state of affairs which the Hottentots attribute to the coming of the white man.

Here is solitude, almost unbroken through the 2,400 square miles of the territory. One day the great hush that rests over the sun-baked Richtersveld may be disturbed by the clamour of gold stamp batteries. Today, from Sendeling's Drift to Steinkopf, and from the rocky gates of Hell's Kloof to the Kloof of Caves, the land stretches

out into shimmering distance under the sun with hardly a sign of man's handiwork that an airman might recognise.

Often during our trek in this wilderness the only shade for 20 miles from the sun temperature of 140 degrees would be a solitary Kokerboom – the tree from which the Bushmen secured quivers for their poisoned arrows. The kokerboom grows higher than the "half-mens." In the trunk of one, standing beside a lonely waterhole, we were puzzled to find a number of rotting pegs evidently driven in years ago. A police officer supplied the explanation. "Relics of the departed Bushmen," he said. "They took that precaution so that if a lion surprised them while they were drinking at the water-hole they could escape up the trunk."

We thought of the Bushmen again when we found a specimen of the rare “Duiker-horings” plant. Each section of the plant, as it grows, carries another section on its back as it were, and the Bushmen called it in their language the “Abba” plant because it reminded them of the manner of their women in carrying babies in skin sacks on their backs. During an exceptionally favourable year two horns grow out at the end of the last shoot to the length of nine inches, widening at the base and changing colour from green to a dappled brown. So like the horns of a buck they are that one invariably raises the gun to the shoulder at the first glance. “Duiker-horings” is a *Stapelia*, and one variety provided the Bushmen with a liquid which, when mixed with snake venom, was used for their

arrows. The poison would paralyse a buck for several minutes; time enough for the Bushman hunter to race forward and make a kill.

Ah, the tragedy of the vanished Bushmen. Only in the depths of the desert will you find these little bands of primitive folk now. I saw one Bushman, a wizened old fellow left behind in the retreat from white progress – one last survivor searching for cigarette ends outside an hotel in Namaqualand. They have gone, leaving only their caves and their pegs in the Kokerboom to show us how they once lived.

A bushman guide would have been invaluable to us in our search for plants that are better able to hide from browsing animals and man than any other plants in the world. Bushmen detected these almost invisible plants

by their odours. We had to use our eyes to discover the freak exhibits of the plant kingdom. Succulents are indeed masters of the art of camouflage. It cannot be mere chance that a Lithops is found wrinkled like the limestone where it grows, or a Dinteranthus with amber, angular leaves growing among the angular quartz of the same colour. Only in the rainy seasons are they completely revealed by great white flowers and blooms of every hue. Unseen and unrecorded, many other queer plants await the explorations of botanists in the desert wonderland of the Richtersveld.

Some of these succulents resemble cones or coconuts; others are like a tortoise, a snake's head, a spiky pincushion or a little brown egg. You will find leaves with tough, waxy

coverings to shed the rain and to prevent loss of moisture during the summer. Many have their leaves packed as tightly as the pages of a calendar; shade means life to these varieties. Fleshy leaves, water-storing stems and formidable names seem to be the characteristics of hundreds of types.

The strange variations in species are best seen perhaps in the aloe – there are more than a hundred different kinds, from a huge tree to an inconspicuous plant no larger than a pebble. Euphorbias have thorns, deep roots and milky juice. The star-shaped flowers of the stapelias give out a meaty odour which attracts insects. One stapelia variety is called “haas-oor”; it resembles the ear of the hare. Then there is Eve's Needle – an aloe with sharp and narrow leaves. The

cotyledon stores food in its ungainly trunk. It is an untidy plant, like the crassula and mesembryanthemums with their contorted stems.

Spines of hairy felt protect some of the succulents against animals. The Tontelboom has a dense hairy covering of lower leaves, used as tinder by old travellers. Some plants possess a scent of fragrant oil which animals dislike.

Self-preservation against long spells of dry and scorching weather is another force that moulds the Karroo plants. They have their underground reservoirs, and they refuse to spread their foliage in an unfriendly climate. But when the rain does come, all the crouching hidden things of the veld reveal themselves in sheets of glowing colour. Then you see sunsets on the ground, scarlet, gold and mauve

covering miles of land that soon becomes again a scorching desert.

CHAPTER 10

THE GREAT SOUTH-WEST

VERY EARLY in these memories of travels and people I took you to the desert coast of South-West Africa on board the coaster Ingerid. Since then I have crossed all the frontiers of this strangely fascinating country. Again and again, year after year, the odd corner and empty spaces have drawn me back. Here indeed is room to breathe.

The coast, a true desert for 800 miles, gave me my first impressions of the land. Those dunes that have swallowed ships and men are not typical of the more kindly plains beyond. I think of South-West Africa now as a vast expanse of rich yellow grass, where mountains rise abruptly from level ground, the granite reflecting vivid red at dawn and dusk.

You must see this from a sleeping-bag on the veld to understand the spell of the country.

While the Hottentot piles thorn-bush on the grey ashes and makes the early tea, I light a cigarette and look back on the short but gripping story of South-West Africa...

It was, within living memory, a “no man’s land” of 300,000 square miles, just a wide stretch of Africa without a flag. The first large body of white settlers were those “voortrekkers” of the ‘seventies, the Boers who finally passed on to Angola. But there were German missionaries and traders in the territory, and Bismarck urged Britain to annex the whole of Damaraland. The refusal of the Cape Government to take the responsibility forms a chapter of history which no South African can read today without deep

regret. The conquest cost Germany much "blood and treasure." Even the discovery of diamonds could not out balance the subsidies poured out for campaign after campaign against rebellious Hottentots and Hereros. South Africa would have colonised with mercy, saving lives and money.

Windhoek, the capital, is a patch of Germany on African soil. The Kaiserstrasse (which has never been renamed) is an impressive street of excellent shops. Just before the Second Great War, many of the shopkeepers still spoke only German. Heavy telephone instruments blazoned with Imperial eagles were still to be found, though the exchange is now automatic. Leutwein Street is still the preserve of high officials. Apart from the South African flag above the "Palace of Ink" (the German-built

government headquarters on the hill) there is little to suggest the Union influence in the capital. Much of the Windhoek architecture is German. Picturesque turrets relieve the corrugated iron roofs, walls are crossed by brown beams, colour is used boldly. Ultra-modern houses with clean lines and glass fronts have sprung up in this distant corner of Africa. The heavy white dust of the streets has disappeared under good paving. Water sufficient to last the town for three rainless years is stored in the dam; and if that supply ever fails, there are hot springs in reserve. Over the hill lies a Roman Catholic settlement where the monks have their fruit gardens and vineyards, where they make wine and strong brandy for the whole territory.

Foremost among the native races are the haughty Hereros, a tribe once 100,000 strong, broken by war and numbering only 29,000 all told. Their women wear the clothes of half a century ago – tiny bodices, leg ‘o-mutton sleeves, enormous Victorian skirts brushing the ground as they walk with melancholy dignity. A sequel to the German campaign against the Hereros was the pledge of the Herero women never again to bear children while Germany ruled their country. On a day appointed the women lined up at the mission stations, dressed in white, to take the oath which they kept rigidly until the Union occupation.

The Hottentots, more cunning than the Hereros, did not suffer so heavily in the German campaigns. There are more than 20,000 of them, mainly in

the southern reserves; no longer hunters, they have not fared well under civilised conditions. In the far north dwell the Ovambos, a large tribe cut off by a desert from the rest of the territory, and thus preserved from tribal wars, from German conquest, and from the ills of civilisation. I have driven through the heavy sand of the Ombuga Flats to the stockaded kraals of the Ovambos – a thirsty journey, dangerous if a breakdown should occur. Many wandering Ovambos have perished from thirst there. They use the sun and the stars as their guides, and if the sky becomes overcast they are lost. I shall take you to Ovamboland later.

The Bushmen of the country, the last people in the world living as Cave Men, have never been counted. Some say there are 5,000 of them, split up

into little clans and spread over vast desert areas. They are without flocks or firearms, homes or money. South-West Africa now treats them wisely. As long as they remain beyond the limits of white settlement, they may use their bows and arrows, even in game reserves, to provide themselves with food, I know these little people, and we are going to their hiding places, too.

On one of my journeys in South-West Africa I travelled with "Oom Chris" Botha, cousin of the famous Boer general. Trekking with this old adventurer, every mountain had its drama, and in every stone there was revealed, if not a sermon, at least a story of human enterprise. "Oom Chris" Botha was a link with men whose deeds have become legends.

Past seventy he was then, but with his kindly eyes undimmed and hardly a grey hair in his short beard. This powerful man who always urged us to sleep on the veld rather than in hotels showed no signs of strain while we drove over the rough tracks of South-West Africa, three hundred, sometimes four hundred miles a day. He first saw this weird land in 1889, only a few years after the German occupation, when he shot elephant in the lawless Kaokoveld and sold his ivory in Walvis Bay. There was not a corner which "Oom Chris" had not penetrated. The great days when he wandered freely with Chapman, the explorer, in search of the tuskers passed when the hunting grounds became game reserves. In later years he sought the wealth below the earth's

surface, and it was on a journey to the goldfields of Rehoboth that I met him.

“Oom Chris” had not missed one of the wars of his time, from the native campaigns of the ‘eighties to the First Great War. In spite of his wounds and his age, he set out on a prospecting quest and with the hope and stamina of a young man. It was a privilege to sit round the camp-fire in such company.

Brukkaros rose like a jagged, aching tooth over the yellow sandy horizon of South-West Africa. “I once sunk a shaft in that volcano,” remarked “Oom Chris” casually. “Looking for diamonds.”

“Hottentots call it Geitsi Gubib,” went on “Oom Chris,” gazing through the clear air at the ancient volcano fifty miles away. “They say it was in eruption just before the Germans

came, and whatever the scientists may think, I believe the story. For a Hottentot could know nothing about a volcano unless he had seen it. Anyway, I found no diamonds there.”

The east wind blew hot “Kalahari kisses” as we raced over the plain towards Keetmanshoop, and for most of that day the broken silhouette of Brukkaros remained on the horizon. The legend told by “Oom Chris” Botha made me eager to hear more of this strange volcano. I found other men who had climbed the mountain and learnt that it was once the scene of a great scientific experiment.

Brukkaros is a lone mountain of porphyry rock, two thousand feet above the plain, jutting up from the dry Fish River. Once it must have been a cone. An explosion shattered the cone and created the large crater

seen today. Dr. A. W. Rogers, who examined it in 1915, declared that it was one of the very few explosion craters filled entirely with non-volcanic material. Baboons found in every other rocky part of South-West Africa, are not seen in the crevices of Brukkaros. Is there a legend among these wise creatures, too, that the mountain once poured out fire and destruction?

The nearest settlement to Brukkaros is the Hottentots reserve at Berseba, nine miles away – a place, like its biblical namesake, at the end of everything. Yet lonely Brukkaros was chosen in 1926 by the Smithsonian Institution as one of the few suitable places in the world for solar radiation observations. The theory is that the sun is a variable star, and that variations in its radiation affect the weather – a theory which, if

proved, will greatly affect the science of forecasting. So trained observers (one of them with his wife and child) struggled up Brukkaros with sixty cases of delicate instruments on pack-donkeys, along a rough road specially made for them and set up their home in a cave. Later a hut was built for them, perched just within the lip of the crater.

There daily observations were taken for nearly five years, while the data they gathered was telegraphed to other stations in Chile and California. Weary years they were for the man and the only woman on Brukkaros. They drew their supplies from Keetmanshoop, a distance of nearly fifty miles, when they visited this small centre of civilisation once a month. Summer rains would turn the sandy bed of the Fish River into a

torrent, and then even this break in the monotony became impossible. They had to do their own housework; the native women declared the Brukkaros crater was haunted by a great snake, and would not even approach the heights.

Hottentots on the plain below had only one explanation for the presence of these watchers of the sun. They were rainmakers. – a task familiar enough to the magicians of many African tribes. Unfortunately a long drought followed the establishment of the observatory, and the scientists were held in low esteem until the next rains came. When there was no rain to fill the reservoirs, water had to be carried up the mountain for the little station. A weary task indeed, though actual results obtained at Brukkaros and other desolate places suggest that it

may one day be possible to predict the world's weather two years or more ahead. The Brukkaros observatory was abandoned in 1931, for dust clouds from the Kalahari sometimes hampered the work. So the lone volcano is again uninhabited, a memorable landmark and an enigma. It was discovered in 1868 by Chapman, later the hunting companion of "Oom Chris" Botha.

Within sight of Brukkaros there lived for many years that strange little Hottentot leader Kaptein Hendrik Witbooi: the man who liked to sign himself "King of Great Namaqualand." Witbooi used Brukkaros for military purposes in his many campaigns, first against other Hottentot bands and the Hereros, and afterwards, against the Germans. Sometimes he left stock there, goats,

in the great crater. I heard of a story of a herd of goats which ran wild on the heights of Brukkaros, and became known to the Hottentots, as the “wilde blaubok.” Witbooi himself, I believe, took refuge in the crater when hard pressed by the Germans. His last stand was at Tses, close by, when he received a bullet wound in the shin from which he died.

“Oom Chris” Botha, of course, had known Hendrik Witbooi and told me why the followers of the cunning Hottentot wore white bands round their wide-brimmed hats. “The Hereros were afraid of Witbooi, and Witbooi knew it,” recalled “Oom Chris.” “When the Witboois went into battle, the sight of their white hatbands struck terror into the hearts of their enemies. In the bush they would use their hats as decoys – stick them up to

be fired at, while the Hottentots lay under cover.”

Hendrik Witbooi, after a temporary defeat by the Germans, settled down at Gibeon for some years under the control of Captain von Burgsdorff. He was on excellent terms with the Germans at this period, and the respect in which he was held was shown by the fact that Governor Leutwein invited him to the officers’ mess and drank a bottle of wine with him. Witbooi had a carriage and four grey horses in which he travelled under the shadows of Brukkaros. There he might have ended his life” comfortably but for the fatal warlike instinct which, in 1904, once more drove him into revolt against the Germans.

In that campaign, and again in the First Great War, Brukkaros was used as a signalling station. Clay huts, beer

bottles and cartridges are still to be seen in the crater. The helios flashed from the summit, an ideal position for keeping in touch with far-flung patrols; probably one of the best sites in the world when the clear air and the flat surrounding country are taken into account.

Brukkaros appears on some maps as Great Brukkaros, on others under the older name of Geitsi Gubib, but all, translated, show that natives saw some resemblance in this shattered mountain to the lower garments of skins which they wore. There is one break in the ring of peaks towards the south, and through this gap a small cascade escapes during the rainy season. But rain does not often fall on those bare brown mountain walls and dead koka trees. It is a place of high winds and fog at night.

Great Brukkaros! If the Hottentot legend is true, we may hear more of this lone volcano on the plains of South-West Africa one day.

Women dreaming of fur coats once saved South-West Africa from Bankruptcy. This vast territory turned from one luxury trade to another, from diamonds to Persian lambs. And in the glossy black pelts the farmers found salvation. Luckily it is a fashion which has been in favour for centuries. Sealskins, chinchillas, sables, wolf and mink may lose their grip on the feminine mind from time to time; but the beautiful fur which some call Astrakhan, and others Persian lamb, always remains an article of value. Women can wear it without looking fat.

They call it “Karakul” in South-West Africa. Karakul lamb silhouettes decorate the walls of Windhoek, where the dealers of many nations have their offices. Karakul transformed the land, paying for high-powered American motor-cars in districts where the farmers had returned in despair to ox-wagons. In the height of the depression Karakul saved the day.

The demand for the skins of animals reared on farms has increased enormously since the beginning of the century. Karakul, once the private monopoly of the Tsar of Russia, has enjoyed first place in the new demand ever since large supplies became available. Buyers in Windhoek told me happily that the demand was greater than the supply.

Examine these lustrous heaps of black pelts in the store room of a Windhoek dealer, and you will see the fascination of the curly Karakul hair. Women with magnifying glasses are absorbed in the work of sorting and grading. They possess the sensitive touch which is vital in a task where the feel of a pelt is even more important than the appearance. At first sight the pelts seem very much alike. Peer into the shining wool, stroke it. Then you will observe the difference known in the trade by such descriptions as “watered silk, broad tail, wavy curl, long pipes, and cork-screw” – descriptions which speak for themselves.

They are beautiful now. How alluring they will become when the dresser has cleaned and polished them and they have been twice dyed black by secret processes!

I noticed a few brown pelts in the sea of pelts. "Rare," said the dealers. "But there will soon be more of them. Half a dozen breeders in the territory are producing brown pelts. Patience, energy and real skill are necessary to obtain an unusual colour. They will succeed." Grey pelts (produced on one farm alone in the whole territory) are valuable too, and they are never dyed. A spot of white sends the value of a pelt down with a run.

Karakul pelt sales in Windhoek draw buyers in peacetime: from the four corners of the earth. Besides the three official languages in South-West Africa – English, Afrikaans and German – you may hear frenzied conversation in French, Italian and American. One year two Persian fur traders arrived with a heap of magnificent rugs which they

succeeded in bartering for Karakul pelts. Their achievement was all the more remarkable in view of the fact that the Persians could speak Arabic, Russian and Hebrew, but no English. (I believe the Hebrew solved the difficulty.) All this cosmopolitan competition kept the average price fairly steady in spite of trade fluctuations overseas.

The secret of South-West Africa's triumph in the Karakul trade lies in the climate. There are few places in the world where Persian lamb's may flourish; but the dry air of the semi-arid inland tracts of South-West Africa has proved as favourable as the ancient home of the industry in Bokhara. The lambs dislike rain. Losses during one of the rare excessively rainy seasons in South-West Africa were almost as great as

those caused by a recent serious drought.

Karakul pelts leave the South-West by the hundred thousand, but not one live animal is allowed to pass the frontier. There is an uneasy feeling among the breeders that large areas of the Union of South Africa, dry parts such as Bushmanland, might become the scene of a huge rival industry. So the flocks are guarded by law, just as the export of ostrich eggs was forbidden in the great days of the feather trade.

The farmer in South-West Africa has learnt how to make large profits. He can purchase the costly Karakul rams with a fair amount of certainty now that elaborate pedigree charts have been compiled. The ram is a treasure to be protected against leopards and jackals; the rest of the flock of Afrikander, Persian or Blinkhaar ewes

may cost no more than ten shillings each. I was assured in Windhoek that a farmer might, with luck and skill, obtain a fifty per cent return on his money in skins alone at the end of the first year. Each ewe may be allowed to produce three lambs every two years with safety. The Karakul is a hardy creature and farms are cheap. Most of the skins are sold direct to exporters who visit the farms.

All the farmers in the country, except those in the tropical northern belt, are now interested in Karakul breeding. They deserve their success, for it has not come to them by chance, but by systematic and scientific work. As a result, the Karakul pelt of South-West Africa now ranks higher in the world's markets than the famous Rumanian pelts.

Packed flat, two hundred and fifty in a bale, wrapped in hessian and naphthalene, the precious Karakul pelts are sent from Windhoek to London. Some used to go to the old fur market at Leipzig; but London captured the greater part of the trade and seems likely to retain first place as an international market. It is a long journey from where the Karakuls roam in the scrub and sunlight of South-West Africa to the glass cases of Bond Street. Few of the sleek women who pass a morning happily spending hundreds of guineas have heard of the homes of the Karakul in such places as Gobabis and Okahandja, Keetmanshoop and Kub. But they know the glossy Persian lambskins when they see one – the coat of their dreams, the dreams that helped South-West Africa back to prosperity.

Unroll the Admiralty charts of South-West Africa. You cannot find in a map the spirit of adventure and lost treasure that a chart, with its reefs and fathoms, suggests to every lover of the sea. This is a tale of the adventure that still flourishes, and the buried riches still awaiting discovery along the last unexplored coast of Africa.

Just below latitude seventeen south you will find the sand barred mouth of the Kunene River, marking the frontier of Portuguese Angola and South-West Africa. They call the coast and the territory south of the river the Kaokoveld. Something of all the romance of Rider Haggard's Africa still lingers in the Kaokoveld and along the almost unknown coastline. Here, to this day, are lost tribes of mysterious natives; wild Bushmen

who may shoot with poisoned arrows at the sight of a white man; elephants, ivory poachers and, so the hunters say, the Ivory Valley where the great tuskers go to die. Here men seek animals such as have never been captured for zoo or museum. Through this unmapped land passed the indomitable Boer trekkers of 1880, only to return, dissatisfied with their treatment by the Portuguese, fifty years later. Here lived cruel and crafty native potentates with the blood-lust of the Zulu Chaka.

I travelled up to Otjiwarongo, on the fringe of the Kaokoveld, in 1928 to meet the first convoy of Boers – the Angola trekkers, they called them, and to write their story. In Windhoek, the capital, I was given a copy of the only rough sketch of the Kaokoveld in existence. It showed the tracks of

Major C. N. Manning, the daring native commissioner who made it, through more than a thousand miles of unexplored country. Along the Kunene River, Major Manning noted on his sketch the hippo, crocodile, wild fowl, islands and safe crossing he had encountered. Southwards from the river, in this land of a hundred million acres, he had marked water-holes and passes in mountain ranges that no white man, perhaps, had ever seen before. Even the Boer trekkers left nothing more than a wagon-track in the Kaokoveld, and the graves of their dead.

It may be asked why the desolate coast of South-West Africa, almost unapproachable as it is by sea, has not been explored by land. Men have set out from time to time into the terra incognita of the Kaokoveld. A German

expedition once left Swakopmund to seek diamonds in the coastal thirst land to the north. They were well equipped with carts, water barrels, food for many months, diamond sieves, and washing machines. They were never seen alive again. Years afterwards, however, three prospectors found an abandoned cart, still packed with rotting gear. Tattered papers in a leather case proved that this cart had formed part of the ill-fated expedition. The exact fate of the Germans is still unknown. "We found the cart in a dead desert, as black as the mouth of hell," said the prospectors.

They found other relics of old tragedies on the waterless coast. Skulls and bones of white men in the burning sand, and the shattered timbers of an old boat – shipwrecked sailors probably, who had escaped the sea

only to perish from hunger and thirst. Soon afterwards the prospectors were forced to return.

It is almost certain that there are long stretches of this desert coast south of the Kunene River where no white man has ever set foot. The Kaokoveld is beyond the police zone. Parts of it are inhabited by Bushmen, while other parts are still ruled by the Hereros – remnants of that once great tribe against which the Germans waged bitter war. Far inland there is a well-known track through the Kaokoveld to the Kunene. But few white men have dared to strike westwards through the sandy coastal belt to see the Atlantic surf thundering on the lonely shore.

It is a land where dramas pass unrecorded; one of the last haunts of the freebooter, the gun-runner, the ivory poacher and other spacious-

mind men who find the law more easily evaded on lonely international borders than in the settled districts of Africa. Muzzleloaders and "hammer and cap" muskets are still used in these parts – a Lee Metford or Martini-Henry is a prized possession. Nevertheless hundreds of modern rifles were found among the Ukuambi tribesmen when they were disarmed after Chief Ipumbu's defiance of the government in 1932. There is little doubt that "smoke traders," as the gun-runners are called, have been active again since then. They take their secret cargoes of guns and liquor to the river, sell them to the natives for cash, and hurry back into Angola before the isolated police posts, Portuguese or South African, get wind of their movements.

Elephant hunters, too, approach the forbidden territory south of the river from Angola. It is estimated that between 500 and 1,000 elephants roam the Kaokoveld. One sees elephant paths everywhere, and the poacher is certain of finding a herd of twenty or thirty head round some of the favourite water-holes. Branches of the widespread Mopani tree provide the elephants with food; while occasional raids on native gardens at fertile places like Kaoko Otavi offer the herds a change of diet. Herero tribesmen in the Kaokoveld actually share their water-holes with the elephants; the natives draw their supplies by day and the elephants arrive only at night. Once the sun has gone down, no native will linger near the water; the elephants, they say, are vicious, their tempers having been spoilt as a result of

merciless hunting by poachers. It is interesting, too, to note that in this corner of Africa rhino and elephant are never found in the same places. A water-hole is known to the natives as a “rhino spring” or an “elephant spring” – as though by tacit understanding they drink apart.

Once there was a Kaokoveld potentate who was greatly feared. He was Chief Oorlog, as romantic an African despot as any to be found in the pages of a novel. I once met an ivory poacher awaiting trial at Windhoek. Oorlog had captured him on the wrong side of the river, and held him there while he sent for the police. That poacher had a fine of £50 to pay, a punishment which seemed to worry him less than the fact that he had been made prisoner by a black man. But Oorlog was the law in that remote territory. In

his old age he became the friend of the white man; he took part in wars against rebellious tribes, and figured in reports to the League of Nations. At the age of eighty or more (few natives know their own ages) Oorlog still wielded tremendous influence along the river, not only over the dominant race, the Hereros, but over other tribes ruled by men weaker than himself. Oorlog, indeed, was strongly reminiscent of Edgar Wallace’s character Bosambo; for Oorlog was not a Herero at all, but an interloper, a son of “Bechuana Tom,” who acted as guide to the early hunters and explorers in South-West Africa.

In his youth Oorlog joined the Boers, the famous Thristland trekkers who opened up the hinterland of Angola last century. For a long period he assisted the Portuguese as leader of the

loyal fighting tribes engaged against rebels. He gained a great though somewhat bloodthirsty reputation as a farrier, but a fondness for looting caused him to lose favour with the Portuguese and finally drove him south of the river as an outlaw. (Colonel Denys Reitz learned that the Portuguese intended to send Oorlog to the island of San Thome as an exile, but that he escaped in time.)

Thus Oorlog took up his residence at his stockaded "stad" near the Kunene. He had received a bullet through his lungs in 1914, while fighting for the Portuguese against Chief Mandume; but the tough old rascal soon recovered from this wound and made himself a power in the land. His remarkable army of Hereros, mounted on donkeys, brought him cattle and overcame all rivals.

Oorlog disregarded the African proverb about the folly of having wives on both sides of the river. Among his harem were women of every frontier tribe; and thus, said Oorlog, he was sure to hear of any threat or treachery in good time. No doubt his children, nearly 150 of them all told, also assisted their father in his task of ruling the scattered people of the river.

Only since the South African occupation of South-West Africa have parties been dispatched to explore the lower reaches of the Kunene; and even today our knowledge of this part of the river is fragmentary. An official expedition to the mouth of the Kunene was carried out in 1933, when police officials accompanied by prospectors succeeded in making the journey in a motor-truck. It was rumoured that the

Kunene was once again being used by raiders – diamond raiders on this occasion – and that a rich hoard was to be found somewhere on the coast to the south of the Kunene estuary. It was a ghastly experience; for they found no diamonds in the waterless dunes, they had engine trouble, and they were forced to travel along the edge of coastal cliffs where one error of judgement would have finished the expedition.

From a point about 200 miles from the mouth, the Kunene has been accurately surveyed – a task undertaken to define the boundary between South-West Africa and Angola. I heard a story of hardship from one of the South African surveyors who had returned to Windhoek weak with malaria. The great event during the tedious survey work

had been the launching of a small river vessel by the Portuguese; enthusiasm ran so high that when the time for the actual launching ceremony came, no champagne could be found. They had emptied the last of many bottles !

If there is a coast in the world which will one day reveal long lost buried treasure, it is the sandy desert edge of South-West Africa between Walvis Bay and Luderitzbucht. This stretch of 250 miles is littered with the bones of dead ships. It is so desolate, water is so hard to find, that diamond prospectors and shipwrecked crews have perished there by the score. But not even among the isles of the Spanish Main or the Pacific will you find stronger evidence of those chests of gold which beckon eternally to the adventurous men of all nations.

Sandwich Harbour, called Port d'Ilheo by the old slave traders who made it their base, is the first romantic lagoon to be visited on this expedition in search of hidden hoards. You must sail down in a cutter southwards from Walvis Bay to reach it; or trek over-land by camel or pack-horse, over twenty-five miles of glaring sand dunes. Beyond the sand pits at the narrow entrance lies the rotting hull of a sailing vessel, now used as a landmark by passing shipmasters. A slaver, so they say. She has square gun-ports and clipper bows; and even in decay there clings to her splintered decks an atmosphere disreputable and sinister.

Once there was a factory here for preserving meat bartered from the Hottentots-houses, stores, workshops. The restless dunes, moving like

snowdrifts, covered everything with thousands of tons of sand.

In the shallow harbour are two islands and millions of seabirds. Where birds flourish there must be fish; and indeed salt fish and guano are the industries of Sandwich Harbour today.

For many years this lonely place was the home of a mysterious elderly German. It was known that he was a doctor of medicine, and that he lived the life of a hermit, taking no interest in the work of the settlement. Some declared he was carrying out secret scientific research; but no one ever knew why he had chosen Sandwich Harbour for this purpose. Perhaps it was because the fishermen and the guano collectors abandoned the place at certain seasons of the year, leaving him entirely alone. One day he packed up his boxes, travelled to Walvis Bay

and took ship for Europe with never a word of explanation.

They still talk of the German doctor at Sandwich Harbour. I have often wondered whether the lean man in stained khaki, bald head, with dark glasses thrust forward as he wandered along the remote shore with his dog – wondered whether this silent exile was seeking the treasure-laden East India-men that is a legend on this coast.

The coast in the neighbourhood of Sandwich Harbour is strewn with the timbers of wrecked ships and the driftwood of centuries. Diamond prospectors camping at Sandwich Harbour, in the days before all prospecting was banned, used to send their Hottentots out with carts to collect firewood. Some years ago a Hottentot “boy” returned to his master in great excitement with a tale of a

ship he had found, large enough to provide firewood for ever! His imagination went no further, but the prospector set out that night with lanterns in the hope of finding something even more valuable than diamonds.

The Hottentot’s story was true. Projecting from the side of an enormous dune, the stern-walk of a galleon, black with age, showed up in the lantern rays. That this must have been an ancient wreck indeed was proved by the hand-carved oak on the stern – men do not carve their ships today.

Labourers were sent for, and an attempt was made in the first light of dawn to excavate the whole stern of the ship. The prospector and his gang were constantly threatened by the collapse of the great sand-dune

looming steeply over them. They shovelled feverishly with their eyes wide open for the landslide. Presently it came, making a rumbling sound of warning that sent every man scurrying out of danger.

Soon afterwards a cloud came rushing along the desert road. Not a rain cloud – rain does not fall once in five years on this coast. It was a dust-storm, a stinging rain of fine sand driven by the wind at fifty miles an hour. While it raged they lay on their faces, struggling for breath. When the dark shadow over the sun vanished they saw that every sign of the old ship had been obliterated. They realised that nothing less than an army of labourers could uncover the wreck. Poor diamond prospectors cannot employ armies. The hull of the old ship still rests there in her sandy grave; empty,

perhaps, but possibly holding a treasure that would startle the world.

South we go tramping on the hard sand at low tides, resting on the loose dunes when the sea rises; south for a day to the little oasis of Meob. Here a prospector named Geldenhuis, washing for diamonds some years ago, was astounded to find gold coins and diamonds mixed with the gravel in his sieve. The coins were of the sizes of half-sovereigns and sovereigns and many bore the clear mark V.O.C. – the stamp of the old Dutch East India Company.

Whence came these pieces? There is a legend among the wretched Hottentot beachcombers that long, long ago, before the first white elephant hunters trekked into South-West Africa, a sailing ship anchored off the coast. The sailors landed and made a great

hole in a hill, covered it over again and sailed away. When the timid Hottentots came out of their hiding places they found dead men on the dunes. The oasis still has the reputation of being haunted.

The pirate legend is supported, to some extent, by those marvellous drawings and carvings which the little Bushmen have left behind them. In other parts of Africa this primitive art is usually confined to men with bows and arrows and wild animals. Bushman caves in South-West Africa, however, have revealed sketches of ships on fragments of ostrich shell, the detail being sufficient to show that the sailing craft depicted were of a very bold type.

Well, the gravel of Meob has been well sifted by many hungry prospectors since Captain Kidd or

some other unknown rascal buried his gold there. We pass on to Conception Bay, a well-known diamond field and a treacherous part of the coast in foggy weather. The steamer Edward Bohlen, wrecked there before the First Great War has been surrounded by sand and is now held on an even keel well clear of the sea. Kaffirs working on the diamond fields camp on board her; and at night it is strange to see lights gleaming from the port-holes of this vessel which will never float again. Close to the Edward Bohlen rests the broken hull of the Cawdor Castle, a fine cargo ship which ran aground in 1925. Steam whalers rescued the passengers and crew, a salvage ship and several tugs rushed to her assistance. But the sands of Conception Bay had gripped the Cawdor Castle too firmly; she broke her back

fifteen days after the stranding and vanished beneath the South Atlantic.

Somewhere in the ghastly dunes, inland from Conception Bay, rumour places the “Bushman’s Paradise.” It is said that there was once a German soldier who lost touch with his patrol during a sandstorm and was found at the point of death, by a wandering band of Bushmen. They took him as a captive to a secret oasis, treating him kindly. At this oasis there were diamonds in enormous quantities – the children played with beautiful blue-white stones. Water was plentiful. Hottentots who had evaded the German troops after the rebellion had established a stronghold there with their cattle.

The German soldier escaped, obtained his discharge from the army, and raised money for an expedition to the

“Bushman’s Paradise.” He was found dead, weeks later, with a Bushman arrow through his heart. In his pocket was a map with the route to the treasure spot drawn in – and several rough diamonds.

There are so many men alive today who declare that they have personal knowledge of part of the remarkable story that some foundation for it probably exists. Several expeditions have set out in search of the Bushman’s Paradise,” and lives have been lost in these attempts. One day, perhaps, the aeroplane may solve a mystery that sun-flayed prospectors with their weary caravans have never been able to penetrate.

Sylvia Hill is the next camp on the treasure trail, scene of the wreck of the little steamer Limpopo in 1929. As a matter of fact, the twin peaks of Sylvia

Hill mark the cemetery of many fine ships, and crews who perished from thirst in that burnt-out wilderness.

There is water, but few know where to find it. You must scratch with your hands at the north-west foot of the hill until the hole you have scooped out fills with fresh water from some underground river. From time to time prospectors have placed boards at this spot describing how water may be found, but the hot “sboop-oo-pwa” wind of the desert has blown them away. In that climate, when the mercury rises to 130 degrees and there is not a patch of shade lack of water very soon means death. Skeletons that appear and disappear at the whim of the winds around Sylvia Hill tell their own story.

Twelve miles to the south of Sylvia Hill are Easter Cliffs, high and rugged, with a hull of the steamer Balgowan

Castle still gripped firmly by the rocks at the base. She carried many cases of candles in her cargo, and for years prospectors supplied themselves with candles from her holds. Near here, too, a remarkable character from the Kimberley Diamond fields, “Moncole” Johnson, found a wonderful depot of sailors clothing. It was packed away so neatly in tarred bales that the years had not destroyed it. Old fashioned it was, but good. Johnson and his labourers rigged themselves out in the warm pea jackets and loose trousers and passed on cheerfully.

Now we approach Spencer Bay, where the wild Bushmen love to rest and feed when there are no white men to disturb them. Sometimes you find a circle of large stones where their kitchen midden has been, filled with fragments

of penguins and mussel shells and the bones of jackals. The mystery of the Bushman is this – where do they find their fresh water? There is none at Spencer Bay.

Here, too, you may see the graveyard of the whales. Death Beach, I have heard it called. The sand is strewn with whale-bone, vertebrae and whitening skeletons of blue whale, sei and finner. Coins and Portuguese relics have been picked up at Spencer Bay, but no one has yet found the source of the treasure. Dolphin Head, the south point of the bay, resembles the Rock of Gibraltar. It rises almost sheer from the sea for six hundred feet. A sea washed cavern, inaccessible from the land and a death-trap for any small boat venturing within the entrance, may hold the key to the secret.

Saddle Hill, shaped like a Mexican saddle, is a fine landmark for navigators and a halting place for every prospector who passes this way. There is a water-hole and a notice marked with skull and crossbones – “Fill your water-bottles.” In these intensely silent open spaces a man must help himself. The long dunes near Saddle Hill have yielded many valuable diamonds, scraped out of their bed of chalcedony, granite and gneiss. Some of the pockets were as rich as jewel-boxes – handfuls of diamonds have been found clustered together with only a few of those other stones which indicate the presence of diamonds.

Hottentot Bay with its pink flamingos and lagoon is yet another place with a legend of old treasure. Here, undoubtedly, there is a wreck covered

by sand. No man can say what lies hidden in that wreck. The cost of excavation has deterred all those who have talked eagerly of it in the bars of Luderitzbucht, only a day's march away, and the end of our journey.

All along this coast the aerial camera, which has uncovered Roman remains in Britain and lost cities in the remote places of the world would certainly give startling results. In the past most of the adventurers of South-West Africa had but one idea in their heads – diamonds. If diamonds lose some of their value, the search may turn to the old wrecks with their more precious gold.

Luderitzbucht is reached at last, a harbour that has crowded more vivid adventure into sixty years than much older seaports with greater reputations

for romance. There are dramas of this desert harbour of South-West Africa which the history books tell. But strange incidents have gone unrecorded.

Diaz set up a stone pillar surmounted by an iron cross at this place, which he called Angra Pequena, in 1487. The reckless crews of the whaling, sealing and guano ships that found shelter there early in the nineteenth century cast down the Pillar of Sao Thiago – some say because of a legend of coins buried beneath it. Captain Owen, R.N., saved the stone fragments in 1833, when the discovery of this relic of the great Portuguese navigator was made known to the world for the first time.

A queer tale, which I have verified, concerns the visit of the Southern commerce-raider Alabama to Luderitzbucht in 1863, when the

whole coast was a no-man's-land. The Alabama used the desolate bay as a hiding-place for some of the prizes she captured. While she was there a seaman named Redford deserted and settled among the Hottentots. There were opportunities for trade in feathers, skins and cattle with visiting ships, and Redford soon became a power in the land and owner of the bay where Luderitzbucht now stands. He was still there at the time of the German occupation. Ignored at first, he was later successful in a claim against the German trading company which opened its enterprise at Luderitzbucht. The German Government eventually awarded Redford a life annuity and distributed 20,000 gold marks among the children. Few other runaway sailors can have fared so well. Redford's Bay

can be found on the Admiralty chart of Luderitzbucht, and his descendants are still living not far away. Herr F. A. Luderitz, the man who named Luderitzbucht, arrived in 1883, and there is a strong reason to believe that he was the original discoverer of the rich coastal diamond area which was not officially discovered until 1908. There are Hottentots still living who remember Luderitz; they say he had two little boxes of "blink klippies" (shining stones) and that he carried these diamonds with him when he sailed down the coast in an open boat on an exploring voyage. Luderitz succeeded in crossing the bar of the Orange River, where he met the natives and, it seems, inquired whether they had seen stones like those he carried. The boat capsized on the return passage to Luderitzbucht,

Luderitz was drowned and the diamonds were lost.

Luderitz employed a South African family named De Roos at his trading station. The shortage of water, the daily sandstorms and monotony made them decide to leave. Just before their departure a Hottentot showed Mrs De Roos a bottle of pebbles. Good-naturedly she gave him some food in exchange for it. Soon after the ship left harbour Mrs De Roos threw the bottle overboard saying: "What is the good of this rubbish?"

There was a remarkable sequel in 1926, when a bottle containing 230 valuable diamonds was washed ashore near Luderitzbucht. From the description Mrs De Roos was able to state that this was the very bottle she had flung away. The whole story was vouched for by the well-known

German missionary, H. Kling. Kling himself refused an offer made by an aged Hottentot to show him the diamond fields which became famous as Pomona. Sometime later, but years before the official discovery, Kling met a German trekking through the desert with Hottentots, camels and donkeys. This German produced a pocketful of diamonds he had found at Pomona. "I would have stayed longer and found more, but I was short of water," the man told Kling. Another missionary, who trekked regularly between Keetmanshoop and Luderitzbucht to fetch his stores from ships, often picked up diamonds and threw them away unrecognised.

The German occupation of Luderitzbucht took place in 1884, after repeated but futile requests to the British Government to extend its

protection to the place. A rusty cannon which had rested in the sand for more than a century was fired in honour of the occasion. Possibly the last men to ram a charge into that old gun had been pirates. Then began another era of wild adventure; Luderitzbucht was filled with queer characters who had been described to me by a man who was there. One of them was Captain Sinclair, a sailor, of tremendous strength who always wore a white top hat in the desert. Sinclair had lost an eye-slashed out accidentally by a whip. Once, when his wagon was stuck in the sand, Sinclair took the place of one of his oxen in the yoke and freed the wheels.

My friend found Luderitz's old store in a state of decay. He decided to dig under the floor, however, and unearthed stacks of needle muskets,

boxes of hats and several cases of brandy. At this time the Germans feared an attack on Luderitzbucht by Hendrik Witbooi, the Hottentot leader. So my friend played the old trick of setting up the hats and the muskets to give the impression of a strong defence. The brandy soon disappeared. Many tales of the great thirst of waterless Luderitzbucht have been told. In those early days, before the steam condenser was built, when all water was sent in barrels from Cape Town and supplies of stronger drink failed, they made concoctions of their own – a cocktail of bay rum, worcester sauce and eau-de-cologne was popular at such times.

My friend once received a cask of Hermitage from the Cape and invited the Prussian officer in command of the small garrison to share it with him.

The wine had to be finished within a day or two, once the cask was tapped. So the two thirsty men occupied themselves until the Prussian put his feet on the table. During the quarrel that followed, the Prussian challenged my friend to a duel and staggered away.

Soon afterwards a sergeant knocked at my friend's shack, apologised for his rank, explained that no commissioned officer was available as a second, and stated that he had come to arrange the details of the meeting. "What weapons would you prefer?"

"Cannon," replied my friend promptly.

"We have only one cannon," said the sergeant solemnly. "All right then – swords."

The Prussian returned in person a little later to point out that two swords had

been raked out, but that one was shorter than the other. This difficulty caused so much argument that they resorted again to the wine cask, both finishing in friendly fashion under the table.

Nevertheless, duels were not infrequent at that period, and my friend was present when a beachcomber, an Englishman, was challenged by a guano island headman Morillo, an Italian. They met on the shore, each armed with a Martini-Henry.

"You can have three shots before I fire," shouted the little beachcomber.

The Italian trembled and lowered his gun. Then the Englishman shot the Italian's hat off, dropped his Martini, and knocked out the Italian with his fists.

“After that,” related my friend, “we all got drunk.”

A beachcomber nicknamed Bismarck, working on an island close to Luderitzbucht in the ‘nineties of last century, found a number of diamonds among the guano. He was paid off in Cape Town and fell a victim immediately to the South African law which forbids any unlicensed person to possess rough or uncut diamonds. In vain “Bismarck” protested that these stones had come, not from Kimberley, but from a field in South-West Africa then unknown. Experts declared that the diamonds were different from those found in the Cape Colony, but even this could not save him from the severe “I.D.B.” law. “Bismarck” served five years on the Table Bay breakwater, at a time when

the Breakwater Gaol was, one of the hardest prisons in the world.

The fact is that many people stumbled across diamonds near Luderitzbucht many years before the great 1908 rush. Sailing ships loaded sand ballast there and carried diamonds away. Then there was the mysterious Xema expedition, financed by that persistent treasure-seeker Lord Fitzwilliam of County Wicklow, Ireland. The Xema was a steamer with a speed of sixteen knots, and she appeared off Luderitzbucht in 1906. Rumours about her mission had gone before her, and she was intercepted by H.M.S. *Terpsichore*, searched and forbidden to prospect for minerals on the islands off the coast. Vigorous efforts were made by the Xema’s owners to secure a concession, but they failed, and the ship departed.

It is clear that the men who chartered the Xema had received accurate information about the great diamond deposits which were soon to yield millions. Probably the manner in which the secret leaked out will never be known, though in Luderitzbucht it is said that a shipwrecked crew picked up a few diamonds and took them back to England.

Another treasure ship which visited Luderitzbucht before the Great War was the steam yacht Alfred Noble, manned by British naval officers on leave. Before she left it was announced that she had been seeking Captain Kidd's treasure. There is some support for the theory that this hoard still lies hidden in the sand-dunes of the South-West African coast.

The story of modern Luderitzbucht really began four years before the First

Great War, when a young German railwayman picked up a diamond and became a millionaire.

August Stauch was his name, and his gang of natives were carrying out the heart-breaking task of shovelling hundreds of tons of desert sand away from the newly-laid railway track. Stauch saw a glitter in the yellow dune. He picked up a fragment which looked like smooth glass. "Diamond, baas," declared a labourer, James Kolman, who had worked on the Kimberley fields. Stauch resigned from the railway service and pegged claims which proved to be marvellously rich. They have not been exhausted yet, those claims at the place named Kolmanskop in honour of the man who knew the difference between a piece of glass and a precious blue white crystal.

The settlement was nothing more than a collection of hot tin sheds. Not a tree, not a patch of grass will grow there to this day. Water costs three pence for a four gallon petrol tin; the whole supply must be brought by train or condensed from the sea. The annual rainfall is less than one inch. But the news of diamonds drew a hungry horde of fortune seekers from every corner of southern Africa. Within a few months a roaring mining camp had grown up around the parched shores of Luderitz Bay – a second Kimberley in the wilderness of South-West Africa. Beer-halls, hotels and ships sprang up in the feverish, reckless atmosphere of this new El Dorado. Flaxen barmaids arrived. Over all floated the German Eagle.

German officials built well, as they did always in any colony – Kamerun,

Togoland, or Tanganyika. When I first steamed into Luderitz Bay, after the territory had been captured by South Africa, I was astonished to see the bright villas and splendid public buildings standing on the edge of that thirsty desert – an etching of spires against a rose-pink sky. But when I landed I had to trudge through streets of heavy sand. All transport was by trolleys drawn by mules along narrow-gauge lines. The houses have double-doors against the sand-storm, which screams through the town every morning. There is hardly a garden in the place. Some decorate the sand in front of their houses with beer bottles in strange designs. With the temperature often not less than a hundred degrees in the shade, the amount of beer consumed by the

thousand white inhabitants is enormous.

The natives live by themselves, two thousand of them in a sweltering tin suburb – a queer stew of black, brown and yellow skinned humanity from almost every African territory. The best workers on the diamond fields are the keen-eyed Ovambos from the far northern districts of the country. They pick out the diamonds from the sifting pan, and have fewer thieves among them than the Hottentot and Cape Coloured labourers. Nevertheless, it is estimated that one diamond in every ten recovered is stolen. The drastic Kimberley methods, where natives are imprisoned in compounds for months on end, cannot be applied in this desert.

Dramatic discoveries are sometimes made in the Namib Desert and the

forbidden “Sperrgebiet” – of coastal diamond areas near Luderitzbucht. In the early days of the German colony a military surgeon named Rogge, and a trooper Fiebecke, set out on horseback from Luderitzbucht with mails and pay for the men of a lonely outpost. The desert swallowed them up. In 1911 Fiebecke’s bayonet and belt were found in the dunes. The search was renewed, and a year later a police patrol found the body of Rogge. The money, about 20,000 marks, was still safe; and the letters, found in a satchel, were delivered after seven years.

Rogge’s notebook contained a farewell letter to his mother and sister in Germany. “The horses have run away, I have lost touch with Fiebecke, and to avoid death from thirst I am going to shoot myself,” ran the surgeon’s last message.

The remains of Fiebecke were not found until 1928. They were buried with military honours in the cemetery at Luderitzbucht after lying out in the desert for twenty-three years. Thus ended one of the terrible dramas of the sand dunes.

Eight skeletons, fragments of clothing, a pocket-knife, and a purse containing coins and notes, were once found by a police sergeant along the desolate coast to the north of the Orange River. Sand dunes must have covered these relics for years. Inquiries proved that these ill-fated men were labourers on the diamond fields who had deserted five years previously. More than a hundred native labourers, dissatisfied with their pay and conditions, had left the fields in a body and started to march southwards down hundreds of miles of waterless desert towards the

Orange River. They carried little food and water; and day after day they left their dead along that ghastly trail. Some of them went mad and threw themselves into the sea. Altogether sixty-five perished. Not without reason is the strip of territory between Luderitzbucht and the Orange River known as the “coast of death and diamonds.”

Such was Luderitzbucht before the First Great War – a town of sandstorms, fogs and withering heat where great dramas sometimes broke the monotony. There the colliers waited for the doomed Russian fleet. There on Shark Island in the bay thousands of Hereros and Hottentots, prisoners of the native wars, died miserably. A grim background for the seal poachers, the diamond raiders, the avenging German Colonial troops, the

prospectors and sailors of all nations who played their parts in these old dramas of the South-West African coast.

The outbreak of war in 1914 naturally presented opportunities to those wily adventurers who hover hungrily on the outskirts of wealth. The guards were withdrawn from the diamond fields of Luderitzbucht when the Germans retreated inland, and one foreigner slipped into the “Sperrgebiet,” collected a parcel worth £80,000, and escaped with it.

The German diamond companies, of course, took their stocks of diamonds with them. When the German forces were hard pressed by General Botha these diamonds were placed in canvas bags, each one bearing the name of a company, and nailed up in a coffin. The coffin was buried in the graveyard

at Grootfontein and a convincing tombstone erected to mark the spot and also to deceive the enemy. A German who assisted at the “burial” reported the affair to the South African authorities and claimed a reward. I do not think he received anything, but I know that the coffin of wealth fell into the hands of the South Africans as loot of war.

One finds a bottle in nearly every diamond tale – the coffin was a break with tradition. Pickle bottles were especially favoured by prospectors and others. I once heard of a German surveyor employed at a lonely spot on the Luderitzbucht who spent much of his time unlawfully collecting diamonds. Fearing a sudden descent on his camp by the police, he waded out into the sea and cemented a pickle bottle full of diamonds into a rock. A

friend with the key to the treasure tried to recover the bottle some time afterwards, but was warned off by the police. The diamonds are still there. And the coast is still patrolled so carefully by the police that no one is likely to ransack that treasure rock.

Luderitzbucht has not lost its fascinating atmosphere of hidden wealth in modern times. Not long ago a woman school-teacher was shown over one of the rich diamond workings. She returned to her room and shook the sand out of her shoes. A diamond rolled across the floor.

It is a smart town today, in spite of the complete absence of greenery. Under the Diamantberg are many neat villas, German hotels and cafes which would not disgrace Hamburg, bathing boxes fringing the lagoon at the spot called Ostende. Luderitzbucht has become

the seaside resort of the southern districts of South-West Africa and illustrated booklets are issued setting forth the charms of the place. A strange contrast, surely, with the duel and desperate adventures which Luderitzbucht saw less than fifty years ago.

But treasure-seekers should be warned by the words of a thirsty old resident who spoke to me. "I implore you not to dig up these sands – you will find only empty bottles."

CHAPTER 11

LAST OF THE CAVE MEN

THOUSANDS OF well-travelled people living in South Africa have never seen a Bushman. I remember, as a small boy, about the year 1907, visiting a missionary exhibition in Cape Town, at which a family of yellow, wrinkled people held the crowds spellbound (and perhaps a little shocked) with their mimicry and primitive habits. Between 1907 and 1936, though I penetrated many far corners of Southern Africa, I encountered few Bushmen. Not until I accompanied the University of Cape Town scientific expedition through the Kalahari in the winter of 1936 was I able to study the wild Bushman clans leading their natural lives in the desert.

It was worth all the freezing midnights and struggles with the sand. The

Bushmen arouse the curiosity of more civilised people mainly, I think, because they are almost the last people in the world still living as the Cave Man lived in Europe long ago. They are the people of the Stone Age, the cunning hunters who stake everything on their skill in the chase and their ability to find water. Other native races have flocks and firearms, homes and money. The Bushmen have retreated from these things. So deep into the desert have they gone, indeed, that there are clans which have never been in contact with white men. They desire nothing but a stretch of country where they can shoot their game with bow and arrow undisturbed, and roam freely like the wild creatures they are. Small wonder that the Bushmen have been credited with powers and

instincts no longer enjoyed by other human beings.

The first group of Bushmen I met had settled for a time at a lonely spot beside the dry Nossob River, 250 miles north of Upington. Donald Bain, hunter and leader of desert expeditions, had persuaded them to remain there so that a party of scientists from the University of the Witwatersrand might examine them, record their speech and songs, watch their dances and investigate their psychology. This was probably the most thorough organised study of the Bushman by specialists ever attempted. Professor Raymond Dart, the anthropologist and discoverer of the Taungs skull, was in charge of the effort. It was a rare privilege to attend the daily “clinics” and to watch this

patient unravelling of the Bushmen’s secrets.

Bain covered enormous areas of desert during the task of collecting typical specimens of the almost extinct Cape Bushmen – the small people known as the Auni, whose ancestors were hunting along the shores of Table Bay when the first Portuguese navigators arrived. The Auni suffered heavily during the centuries that followed, so that by the beginning of last century the last wild band had passed out of sight of Table Mountain, and at the beginning of the present century there were only a handful left to the south of the Orange River. It was a precarious refuge the Auni found in the sandy wilderness where the rivers run once or twice in a hundred years. Treated like wild beasts by white men and black tribes, the Auni Bushmen

dwindled in numbers. Professor Dart estimated that about half the survivors were represented among the seventy Bushmen brought together by Mr. Bain. There was no doubt that the group was the largest ever seen in modern times. The Kalahari will not support large bands in one place; and so each Bushman clan has its own territory, unmarked, but so clearly understood that the poacher of game and the stealer of water risks death when he crosses the invisible boundary. Thus these few dozen of Auni men, women and children, some pure-blooded, others of mixed descent, made a memorable sight. In height, they were 31 inches below the average of the shortest Bushmen measured in South-West Africa and the Western Kalahari – dwarfs indeed when

compared with the white men studying them.

I found more Bushmen on the northward journey along the South-West Africa-Bechuanaland frontier. There were Narons in the Gobabis district – fierce little men who killed a magistrate in 1922 with poisoned arrows. At a frontier police post a number of Bushmen were serving sentences for cattle raiding. And at Ghanzi, wizened Bushmen and their fat wives were to be seen on every farm. The Ghanzi magistrate told me there were not less than ten thousand Bushmen in his remote area though most of them were beyond the reach of the law. The merry band of Auni people, however, I came to know best of all. Everyone liked them; it was pleasant to discover such care-free humans, acting round their campfires

as though the world was young and peaceful.

One of the most interesting discoveries during my stay was made while six women, all of one family, were singing in chorus for the benefit of the professor of music. The songs, in the Afrikaans language, were plainly old folk-songs, known in South Africa as “liedjies”; but not one of the listeners could recognise either tunes or words. The women repeated the mysterious verses, crouching round the fire under their leopard-skin karosses, high-pitched voices ringing through the hush of the desert. Then the expert listeners realised that these songs had not been heard by civilised ears for nearly a century. Some forgotten Dutch “voortrekkers” must have passed this way into the desert, and sung these lost “liedjies.” Unseen

Bushmen listened and remembered, handing down the words and tunes to their children. Now the songs had returned like echoes, to be recorded and preserved generations after the bold adventurers who sang them had gone to their unknown graves.

The unmarried girls who gave the performance that night were led by a girl of about fourteen. She was beautiful according to Bushman standards, a dancer and natural actress who would have delighted audiences in Europe. She led her little family troupe with all the skill of a ballet mistress, bringing into the dance a wonderful grace of movement. It was difficult to guess the origin of some of these dances. The girls had decorated their faces with gemsbok blood; they wore springbok skins round their waists and beads of ostrich shell. Each

girl carried her make-up of powdered roots in the shell of a tiny tortoise fastened to her ankle.

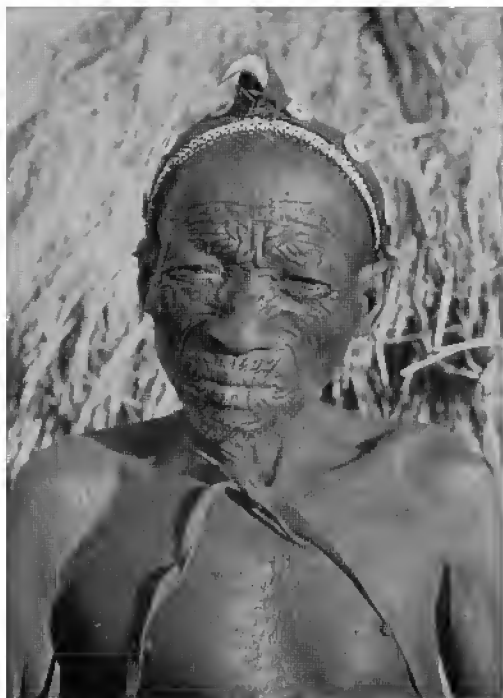
In one dance the steps were identical with the Charleston – that old craze of the cities which could never have reached this far corner of the desert. A waltz played on a gramophone baffled the Bushmen at first, but after Bain had given a rather heavyfooted demonstration, the leader picked up the time and gave a desert version of the dance.

Later that night all the Bushmen of the camp danced to celebrate the arrival of a new group of the little people. Under a moon that was almost full, and with naked limbs reddened in the firelight, the men stamped out a circle in the sand with feet thudding, cocoon anklets rattling and the women clapping and singing in barbaric

cadence. Bain had usually to set a limit to the dancing, or the Bushmen would have continued all night. On this occasion, however, he gave no orders, for he knew that the dance would encourage the new arrivals to become friendly with the Bushmen already settled in camp.

Among the dancers was a famous Bushman character named Old Abraham – a wizened dwarf who had been known to scientific investigators in South Africa ever since 1850. No wild man was Abraham, but a wise and friendly old fellow who still enjoyed life in the open at an age of at least a century. He died a year or so after this meeting, I heard, but he remained vigorous almost to the end.

Abraham's age and excellent general health raised an interesting point – the well established longevity of the Bush-



Old Abraham, the centenarian Bushman,
photographed by the author in the Kalahari.

men. Their physical appearance is not impressive, but of their resistance to disease and the most fearful accidents of the desert there can be no doubt. Abraham had never used a toothbrush, but he still possessed a full set of teeth, worn almost to the gums. Youngsters of sixty and seventy had perfect white teeth. Research has proved that the Bushmen are less liable to ailments and epidemics than other native races in South Africa. The great Spanish influenza scourge of 1918 did not leave them unscathed, but the mortality was not severe. A high death-rate always exists among the children, due to desert conditions, ignorance and the inevitable deficiencies of diet. But the survivors are not easily infected – weaklings are non-existent by the time the people reach adult age.

Bushmen are said never to contract smallpox or leprosy. When smallpox swept through the Cape in the eighteenth century, with a toll of many thousands, the Bushmen alone escaped. During the rainy season in the Kalahari the Bushmen cannot avoid malaria, but they do not suffer as heavily as the Hottentots and Bechuanas. The Bushmen have their own herbal remedies, and what is more, the will to recover. I heard of a Bushman mauled by a lion near Ghanzi. In spite of great pain, he had the presence of mind to throw sand in the lion's eyes, and thus broke away with ghastly injuries. A police sergeant found him suffering from septic poisoning and treated him. The Bushman is alive today. Few white men would have survived such an encounter.

Once the Bushman roamed the shores and forests of South Africa, leaving in caves and on koppies those wonderful paintings that a Royal Academician could not improve upon in colour or action. The Bushman fled for his life from these pleasant places where he was never thirsty, and found refuge in a wilderness that civilised man did not covet. Now large areas of his desert have been cut up, surveyed, proclaimed as game reserves or – where there is grass and water – handed over to ranchers. It was inevitable, but for the Bushman it was a tragedy. Meat he must have; yet when he trails a gemsbok bravely and brings it down within the area of a police patrol, he cannot feast in peace. The unknown horrors of prison await him – prison, where so many Bushmen

have languished and died like wild creatures in a zoo.

Bain's camp on the Nossob became a sanctuary indeed for the hard-pressed Bushmen. Some of them had been living to the northward, between the Auob and Nossob, in the area known officially as the Kalahari Gemsbok National Park. They had just been turned out of this happy hunting ground, and would have fared badly but for Bain's hospitality. The Union Government has now realised that these little humans deserve the protection already given to the animals, and a Bushman reserve has been created where they can live their own lives.

Bushmen do not peer into the future. The bands I saw gathered at Bain's Camp recovered their good humour immediately they found there was nothing to fear. They devoted them-

selves to games and merry-making, showing their gratitude plainly and winning the hearts of all who studied them. You will see no happier people in Africa than a party of Bushmen with full stomachs.

The Bushmen adore their children, and reveal their affection in many ways. In the dance of the gemsbok, for example, the fathers teach the children a lesson that saves lives during the chase in years to come. A wily old hunter takes the part of the gemsbok, holding sharp sticks to his head to represent the horns; while the children are the dogs. Every movement of a hunting drama is portrayed with such realism that the human bodies fade out, the brown man with the horns becomes a cornered antelope, the children dashing in and out, snapping and barking, are dogs indeed. The

gemsbok slashes left and right fiercely, then tires, pants, struggles for life while the hunters shout and thrust their spears forward. Finally the buck goes down, fighting to the last, hunters and dogs close in and the dance ends. A young Bushman is not reckoned a man until he has killed a gemsbok or some other dangerous game, and his parents are anxious that he should not go out ill-prepared for the ordeal.

Dogs are the only domesticated animals the Bushmen have ever possessed. They have never owned cattle, and thus (unlike the more prosperous Hottentots) their ideas of numbers are extremely limited. "One, two-many, says the Bushman. The dogs, however, have been their companions for centuries. Side by side they have travelled far through Africa and together they have won many little

victories. The finest type of Bushman hunting dog, a light brown ridgeback mongrel with dark stripes and a trace of the greyhound in his appearance, is now verging on extinction. They are without a doubt the best dogs in the world for the hunter's purpose, lean and savage, ready to keep a wounded leopard at bay until the master finds an opening for his spear. One of the most typical of these dogs I saw stood about fourteen inches at the shoulder with a length of body seemingly out of proportion to that height. A broad forehead, sharp muzzle, upright ears and long drooping tail made him anything but a beauty. Yet this was possibly the oldest and certainly the most cunning breed of dog in the world.

A fugitive with his master, the Bushman dog has learnt the virtue of

silence. Some declare this dog never barks; at all events there is no senseless barking to give his master's hiding-place away. The dog slinks always behind his master, taking advantage of every patch of shade, reserving his energy for the moment when he is called upon to distract the quarry's attention. Sensing danger, he will give only a warning whine. Between Bushman and dog there is complete trust and understanding. Many travellers in the Kalahari have tried to bribe the Bushman with tobacco to part with a hunting dog, but I have yet to hear of one who was successful.

It is natural that these primitive people should have kept alive that early luxury, the tale that is told. One of the scientists pointed out to me a Bushman who had just arrived in camp

from a great distance. He squatted beside a fire and held his small audience enchanted by his narrative. "He is describing everything he has seen since he has been away," said the scientist. "Animals, birds, trees, the smallest living things of the veld, the remote water-holes where he quenched his thirst – every detail has a meaning for these people. For an hour or two, perhaps, he will talk and the others will not utter a word. Then, when he has finished, they will ask questions."

The Bushman, as I have said, lives in the present and has only the vaguest tradition to explain his origin. Rare indeed is the Bushman who can tell you anything of a departed grandfather. I met a lonely farmer who had discovered queer rock engravings on his property, and tried to find an



The author and Titus Matthys, a famous Southern Kalahari hunter.

interpretation with the aid of Bushmen working for him as labourers. The Bushmen could suggest nothing; it was not reluctance, but sheer ignorance. The farmer himself observed that the engravings were all near sources of water, and believed they were messages from one old Bushman clan to another. Engravings are rare, but the paintings of hunting scenes on the walls of rock shelters are found from the Cape northwards through Africa to the very hillsides of Mediterranean countries. The resemblance between paintings discovered in Europe and those found thousands of miles to the south is so striking that the migration of the Bushmen can be traced without guesswork. I think the gnomes and elves of ancient Europe were none other than the dwarfs who

danced for us at Bain's Camp in the Kalahari.

Murders by Bushmen on the frontiers of South-West Africa still find a place occasionally in the day's news. They raid the outlying farms, shoot cattle with their poisoned arrows, and defend themselves when pursued by the police.

Yet the Bushmen do not entirely deserve the sinister reputation that clings to them. There are reasons for their clashes with the police. In Gobabis one day I heard tales of the Bushmen that revealed the better qualities of the strange little people who live beyond the law. Gobabis is a railhead on the eastern frontier of South-West Africa, centre of a huge district in the pioneer stage. The Bushmen have not forgotten their

treatment by the Germans, when they were hunted and shot at sight. Even in those days, early in the century, however, there was one man who became friendly with the Bushmen – a man who treated them with kindness and earned their gratitude. He was still living in Gobabis in 1936, this Herr Albert Lemke, a lean and sun-bronzed Mecklenburger, 71 years old, with a pointed beard and a pioneer face. We sat together in the hotel beer garden and I listened to the story of an adventurous life. "Ja, I was a Kalahari trader – exchanging cups and knives for ostrich skins," recalled Herr Lemke. "I have seen lots of Africa. When I first went to the Victoria Falls there was nothing there. I have walked for nearly a hundred miles in the desert with all my water in one ostrich egg, after my horses died. And so I

came to know the Bushmen. Some people ask me – how can you recognise a Bushman? It is a great controversy among scientists sometimes. Well, you must have an eye for a Bushman. The pure-bred Bushman is not so yellow as a Hottentot. He is small, his cheek-bones stand out like the Chinese, and his peppercorn hair grows in patches with bare skin between. After I married, I settled at Rietfontein, a favourite water-hole of the Bushmen, and brought up my children among them.

I had been to Rietfontein and seen the ruins of the German fort, the barracks and Lemke's store. Rietfontein lies on the track to the Ghanzi settlement and Lake Ngami. It is about 170 miles from Gobabis, and a German garrison was stationed there during the Herero wars – a last outpost only a few miles

from the Bechuanaland Protectorate boundary. Lemke kept beer and provisions for the soldiers and traded with the remote Ghanzi people.

"I tamed the Bushmen and they became my faithful servants," went on Lemke. "Some of them could understand Afrikaans and German, and I could speak their language. They are not stupid; it is only that they have never seen a white man's possessions, and have to learn how to hold a spade before they can use it. You have heard of the marvellous endurance, the physique of the Bushman? I will give you an example. When I wanted to send letters to Gobabis I would give them to a Bushman runner. Again and again that little fellow covered the double journey, 340 miles, within five days.

“Go out hunting with a Bushman and you will see how he follows a wounded buck, hour after hour, tireless until he overtakes the creature with the arrow in its flank. His eyesight, I think, is more like a bird than a human being. Often my Bushman tracker has urged me to shoot – he has seen the horns of a buck two thousand yards away, invisible to me.

“Ja, they are tough, those Bushmen. Once there was a little Bushman boy caught in a steel game trap. There was a leopard around – and it would have eaten him – so the boy cut his foot off and escaped.

“A Bushman will never leave his master’s side in time of danger. Now I have met a lot of lions, but I have never shot one. There was a Kalahari hunter whose rifle misfired – a lion

had him down and was mauling him, when a Bushman servant caught the lion’s mane and tried to pull it away. You must remember that these people have always killed their game at close quarters. They have faced every wild beast, wounded and at bay. Their bravery is almost incredible.

“Only a few years ago two prospectors left Gobabis, trekking by ox-wagon into the Kalahari, and intending to be away six weeks. The time passed and no word came from them. An aeroplane was sent out to search. The missing men were located with a band of wild Bushmen, who had led them to water and saved their lives. “The Bushmen is treacherous only when he is approached in the wrong way. It is suicide to come between a Bushman and his meat. Sometimes, when game is scarce, the Bushman is half starved;

and in a dry season he will attack a stranger who approaches the water-hole where a thin trickle keeps him and his family alive. But that is the law of the wild – the Kalahari is to blame, not the people who live there so precariously.

“Nowadays most of the trouble between the Bushmen and the police is caused by the game laws. Bows and arrows have been declared illegal weapons. Then comes a long drought, and the Bushmen are forced out of their hiding places to seek food. News of their raids reaches the police, a patrol goes out, and if they find the Bushmen (which does not often happen) then there is a fight.

“In 1922 Captain van Ryneveld, the magistrate of Gobabis, led the police in an attempt to round up a party of Bushmen raiders. I warned him not to

ride in among the Bushmen – they would not understand that he was only trying to arrest them. So the magistrate was killed by a poisoned arrow. Most of the Bushmen who took part in that fight are still roaming the desert, free. White men cannot catch Bushmen.”

In Gobabis and several other places I saw the sinister arrows that, even in recent years, have killed white officials, missionaries and many natives. Very little is known of the poisons used, for each group of Bushmen has its own plant juices, leaves and grubs. Some authorities state that snake venom is employed, but others deny this. One scratch is fatal when the poison is intended to kill. Many arrows, however, are tipped with a mixture that paralyses the game but does not spoil the meat. Poison-making is a secret ritual. Ready for

use, the poison is stored in hollow pebbles.

During a raid in the Epukiro area north of Gobabis a police horse was struck by an arrow. Some of the Bushmen were caught, and the police forced them to apply the antidote to the poison. The life of the horse was saved, while samples of both poison and antidote were sent to the Government analyst. Thus one secret was revealed, though many remain undiscovered.

The Bushmen make their arrows with a weak point in the shaft, so that a wounded buck dashing away through the bush will shed part of the arrow while the poison tip remains in the flesh.

I was shown tiny bows no larger than a man's finger, made of gemsbok and

eland horn. Little quivers held darts steeped in deadly poison. The Bushman does not part readily with such possessions. They are made, not as toys for the children, but with one object – murder. This is the Bushman's "love bow," or "revolver," the weapon he selects when there is a quarrel round the camp-fire over women. The arrow is usually aimed at the victim's ear while he is asleep.

Larger arrows are often tipped with the shank bones of ostriches. The poisoned head may be detached and slipped into the hollow shaft for safety. At Bain's Camp the box of arrows he had collected was kept locked. When he opened it, and I stared at the arrows, I felt my eyes smarting. The poison gives off a vapour with this effect, unpleasant but

not dangerous. All attempts to analyse the insidious poison have failed.

There is no doubt that the Bushmen use their bows and arrows with skill equal to the finest the world has ever seen. These small men, wiry rather than muscular, make their bows of extremely tough wood – so tough, indeed that only the strongest white man can hope to bend one to its fullest extent. Strung with sinew, a bow three feet in length drives the arrow home with tremendous force. Like all savages, they invariably stalk their game and shoot when a miss is almost out of the question. I watched a queer demonstration at a Kalahari police station where a Bushman was awaiting trial on a charge of murder. The constable who had captured the man was a Bushman, too, and they made a remarkable contrast – the prisoner

naked save for his leg irons, the Bushman constable in blue uniform jersey and shorts. A cigarette tin was set up at a distance of fifty yards, and both Bushmen displayed their skill. They used the bow and arrows which were to appear as exhibits at the trial! The murderer, who had been pining in gaol for weeks, gave a poor show. His shooting improved when I held out a few cigarettes. The constable was the better marksman, however, in spite of the fact that he had been trained to use a rifle and had not drawn a bow for months. I admired the way he estimated the wind by throwing dust in the air.

When hunting buck and ostriches, of course, the Bushman adopts suitable disguises, aided by his art of mimicry. He can walk right up to a flock of ostriches wearing a skin and feathers,

supporting the long neck on a stick preening himself as he goes. A small bush serves the purpose when buck are being stalked. At such times there is no limit to his patience. Chapman, the famous hunter and trader, recorded meeting a Bushman who had wounded a giraffe and followed it for fifty miles. Many a Bushman has trailed a wounded animal without rest for three days rather than lose the meat.

One of the earliest accounts of the Bushman, written by a Dutch explorer in 1659, described them as “an entirely wild nation without houses or cattle, but well armed with bows and arrows.” That, as I have seen, is true today. The search for food and water keeps them for ever wandering, so that they have no homes more permanent than a grass shelter from the wind with a fire to keep the lions away. Every

old Bushman carries scars on his wrinkled stomach, signs of cold nights when he has curled up too close to the fire and been scorched. Seldom does a clan consist of more than twenty men, women and children – the struggle for food is too hard, and the Bushmen must scatter to survive.

Each clan stores water in ostrich eggs, and each has its secret drinking places; tiny wells covered over with stones and sand, not a tell-tale sign of the precious hoard remaining unconcealed. When the springs dry up in a bad season, and the ostrich eggs are empty, there are always roots and bulbs and the wonderful t’samma melons to sustain life. I noticed Bushmen children with stomachs swollen to an alarming extent, the result of over-indulgence in this wild melon that is moist, but lacking in

nourishment. Nevertheless, without these melons the desert would be uninhabitable. They grow always on the tops of the dunes, in great patches. The Bushmen store them in dry sand, so that the melons remain in good condition for weeks. From the crushed seeds a drink is made, the poor Bushman's coffee. All the animals, from the elephant and lion right down to the desert mice, flourish on the speckled green melon. T'samma, roasted in the camp fire and then cooled, quenches the Bushman's thirst. Roast t'samma and jackal form the Bushman's favourite dish.

Any other race, faced with the prospect of obtaining all their water from the juice of a melon, their food from roots and berries, would probably have collapsed and died. The Bushmen were determined to live, and

so these hardy bands of hunters have survived precariously into our own time. They are without chiefs or leaders, without the simplest tribal organisation. Surrounded on all sides, with no hope of retreat, asking for no mercy, the Bushmen are still fighting desperately for survival.

CHAPTER 12

KALAHARI JOURNEY

FAR OUT in the western Kalahari during that 1936 journey, I came to the loneliest white settlement in Africa. This is Ghanzi, founded by Cecil Rhodes, forgotten after his death, but still struggling against isolation. Ghanzi reminded me strongly of Tristan da Cunha.

There were white settlers at Ghanzi. Tristan is cut off from the outside world by more than a thousand miles of ocean; while Ghanzi lies beyond a waste of hundreds of miles of sand that only the most determined motorists care to tackle. In the ox-wagon days, and even after the First Great War, the mails took five months to reach Ghanzi. Then, no medical help could ever be obtained. Now the nearest doctor is 200 miles away at

Maun in Ngamiland. And even today the mails from Cape Town cover the last few hundred miles of the journey to Ghanzi on pack-donkeys, arriving a month after posting.

White men have died of thirst along the track to Ghanzi, and some have perished with the poison of Bushman arrows in their veins. Aeroplanes have been sent out to find lost parties. A hard journey it was to Ghanzi, a weird country and a brave settlement at the end of the trail.

Most maps of the Bechuanaland Protectorates show Ghanzi, not far from the great right angle that breaks the line of longitude forming the western frontier. On some it is marked "Boer Settlement," which is only half correct. The covered wagons that reached Ghanzi on Christmas Eve, 1898, sheltered families of both Dutch

and English descent, in equal numbers. News of good ranching country in this distant corner of the Kalahari had been brought to Cecil Rhodes by an explorer named Isaac Bosman. One or two other white hunters and traders had been in the territory during the 'nineties of the last century; Robert Lewis, killed by a leopard; and the adventurous Van Zyl, a great elephant hunter whose legendary hoard of buried gold and ivory is still sought in the Ghanzi district. Van Zyl built the first house at Ghanzi, long before the trek – a luxurious mansion with stained-glass windows and polished wood floors. He was ambushed and shot by the Damaras not long afterwards, leaving as remote a home as ever man built in unmapped country.

Tales of the rich Ghanzi plateau, at all events, convinced Rhodes of the possibilities of establishing a white colony there. Added to this was an urgent political motive. The Germans in South-West Africa were looking enviously towards the empty land beyond their eastern border. A further expansion of territory would threaten the dreamer's Cape to Cairo railway whereas a buffer state under the Union Jack would protect that dream. So Rhodes made his offer to land-hungry, restless people in South Africa – free farms, each 10,000 acres, water-boring machinery, full equipment for the desert trek right down to pipes and tobacco, needles and cloth for the women, sacks of meal and finally a gift of £200 for each family.

Sixty families gladly accepted the offer and gathered at points on the

present Cape to Bulawayo railway line to set out on the westward journey. Of these 300 brave souls, few are alive today. One of the survivors at Ghanzi gave me an impression of the trek, the long series of disasters when the people of the wagons left their dead under heaps of stones beside the trail.

Lightning killed a man and his wife, leaving their baby untouched. Rinderpest took toll of the cattle. Sometimes heavy sand dunes barred the route, so that wagons could not cover half a mile a day. Water was the thought that filled the minds of all of them in that heat-laden wilderness. Often the tiny wells dug by Bushmen yielded a scant and grudging supply. Limestone pans they expected to find full were almost dry. They were muddy holes where the last dregs of water were poisonous. On

each thirsty stretch some of the weakest travellers died.

Bushmen attacked the weary column and were driven off. Daring young men wandered away from the wagons and were lost for ever in the bush or taken by lions. Then, in the swamp region, came malaria, and the names of more victims were carved on the baobabs. Fortunately the natives were friendly; they had never seen white faces before. By this time the journey was nearly over – the journey that had lasted seven months – and the wagons turned south towards the plains of Ghanziland. Beside Ghanzi Pan they halted and gave thanks for their safety. But even then the strain of the journey had not ended. Several of the old people who had come so far were buried in the new settlement.

After the trek came fresh troubles. To the west, the Germans were at war with the Hereros and Hottentots. To the east, unknown to the Ghanzi settlers, the South African War was being fought and stores eagerly awaited were not sent forward. For many months the people lived without tea or sugar. Rhodes died, the remote colony at Ghanzi that might have flourished under his care was neglected for years. Families became discouraged and abandoned the Promised Land to join those other adventurous spirits, the "Thirstland Trekkers," bound for the highlands of Angola. Only about twenty families remained at Ghanzi.

The descendants of these hardy settlers of 1898 were far more comfortable, if not entirely prosperous, when I reached Ghanzi with the University of

Cape Town Kalahari expedition in July, 1936. We travelled by motor-car along the route used for all fast transport to the settlement. It is still merely a rough track from Gobabis in South-West Africa, across the frontier at the Sandfontein police post, through Olifant's Kloof where Van Zyl shot a hundred elephants (all bogged and unable to escape) in one day. Olifant's Kloof is now a Bechuanaland Protectorate Police station, a bleak spot where the cold stone houses overlook a great area of almost barren plain.

From this lonely spot the route cuts back into South-West Africa at Fort Rietfontein, the old German outpost held with difficulty against the Hereros; now only ruins, visited by Bushmen, so far from law and order that it is officially described as "outside the police zone." There the

expedition filled water-bottles at a permanent spring, camped near the old stone barracks, and drove on early next morning to the first homestead in the Ghanzi block of 42 farms.

The centre of the settlement is the magistrate's office and. post office. There is no village. At first the geography is baffling, for Ghanzi is a farm name, and the scene of government is actually at Gemsbok Pan some miles away. Apart from wireless receivers owned by the magistrate and police sergeant, and the fortnightly donkey mail, there is no communication with the outside world, one way or the other. No telegraph or telephone line. No air mail, though a windsock flutters on Gemsbok Pan and a veterinary official flew there during a "foot-and-mouth"

epidemic. With a magistrate in residence, however, it is no longer necessary for young couples to travel 500 miles to Mafeking for a marriage ceremony. The journey takes four days by motor-car, but there were few wealthy farmers and just six cars. One settler had arrived to take up land during the previous two years. Nearly all the people of Ghanzi remain in the territory year after year, going to Mafeking only when the cattle are driven to market. A perilous business, this, for in a dry season hundreds of head fall along the desert route. They go south from Ghanzi to Lehututu, then west to the railway line. A "thirst" of 135 miles is rushed in four days. When the veld is good, however, the cattle reach Johannesburg, their final destination, in excellent condition. Goats and pigs thrive at

Ghanzi, and recently the Karakul has been introduced.

Nearly 2,000 Bushmen, male and female, are employed on the farms in the 50,000 square miles of the Ghanzi district. It was estimated at the census, taken with more than fair accuracy in 1936, that there were another 8,000 Bushmen living in their wild and primitive state in the area. At Ghanzi the settlers speak well of the Bushmen. I saw the small men with humorous, wrinkled faces drawing water at the wells and bringing in the flocks at sunset. The gaol was almost empty.

“You can take a Bushman’s word when he is charged with a crime,” an official told me. “Murder or stock theft, it makes no difference – if he denies committing the crime you may be sure he is not guilty.”

The Bushmen are of four clans, Minarwa, Mikwikwi, Xgon and the lighter-coloured, wilder Makoko. Even today little is known of the Makoko country. They say that large diamonds and an arrow tipped with gold have been seen in the possession of Makoko Bushmen. Let me warn prospectors – the police know little or nothing about the land of the Makokos, and the Bushmen are still ready to attack strangers.

The pioneer atmosphere, indeed, still clings to Ghanzi. Cattle kraals have formidable stockades, lions are shot within four miles of the magistrate’s office. Girls grow up in the saddle and know how to handle a rifle. The farms are so scattered that the people look forward to meeting at the post office on mail day. A dance is a rare event. Shopping, apart from the few

essentials kept at the one small store, means sending orders out of the country and paying a transport charge of ten shillings a hundred pounds weight.

Education, however, has never been neglected. A schoolmaster accompanied the original trekkers, and now there is a school for white children as well as two native schools. It is pleasant to record the fact that this small colony of English and Afrikaner descent has never known racial differences. They have endured so many hardships together that they have become one body living in complete harmony. They still face the same difficulties and dangers. Every summer there is the malaria. Every dry winter the wells must be deepened to overtake the receding water. Always

there is the problem of finding markets for the cattle.

A long track it is to lonely Ghanzi, a sandy track that wriggles through the yellow grass while thorn-bushes scrape the paintwork of the car and ridges send the back wheels up in a choking flurry of dust. Here the wild ostriches roam, the springbok pause in groups to watch the passing traveller. Bushmen, too, stare from their hiding places, but are seen only when they think the traveller is a friend with tobacco to give them. Ghanzi with its stone walls and gardens, windmills and glossy cattle, is the Kalahari in a mellow mood. Only those who have seen the grim land separating Ghanzi from the outer world can realise the price the early trekkers paid for possession of their remote acres.

Within living memory the blue pool marked Lake Ngami on all large African maps was indeed a mighty sheet of water. Yet in July, 1936, I drove one of the motor-cars of the Cape Town University Kalahari expedition across the hard turf of Ngami. Somewhere in this waterless sea I shot an ostrich for the meat-hungry Batawanas. Never a puddle of water did I observe in all that wide expanse of yellow grass and reeds.

David Livingstone was the first and also the last white man to see Lake Ngami in all its glory. "We could detect no horizon where we stood ... nor could we form any idea of the extent of the lake except from the reports of the inhabitants of the district," wrote Livingstone. That was in 1840, and since then an astonishing geographical change has occurred – all

the more remarkable because the natives of the territory appear to have been responsible for it. The transformation of the Kalahari and its water system is still a controversial subject among scientists, of course, though much has been done towards solving the mystery. The fact remains that Lake Ngami has vanished in our own times. As the Bushmen said: "The lake dried up and the dead fish and animals were devoured by the vultures."

Nevertheless, the Ngami region has lost none of the primitive fascination that drew the old explorers there at the risk of their lives. In the unchanged forests round Ngami I found it easy to imagine men like Baldwin, the hunter, eating roast giraffe and loading their wagons with ivory three quarters of a century ago. Then Ngami was the "Ultima Thule" of bold spirits. Today

it is still beyond the experience of all but the most determined African travellers. Even the air pilots who look down on many remote wonders of Africa seldom pass that way.

Rumours of Ngami were carried by natives to the outside world long before the journey which was to become Livingstone's first step to fame. One may ask, indeed, whether some unknown member of "the lone grey company before the pioneers" did not follow the legend to its source years before the official discovery. At all events, Ngami was the first of the great lakes of Africa to be placed on the map, and cartographers have not seen fit to indicate that it is now a mirage. Extravagant stories and the actual shrinking of the lake caused disappointment among the early travellers. They expected to hear the

roaring of the inland sea and found instead a shallow stretch of bitter water. Once, it is clear, the lake was so wide that the natives feared to cross it in dug-out canoes. Sudden winds must have been responsible for hundreds of drowning's when Ngami was a lake. Yet five years after Livingstone's arrival, Anderson saw a low expanse of water only nine miles wide. Anderson's wagons made the first tracks of the Ngami trail from Walvis Bay. It is a highway that ranks with the Old Hunter's Road to Rhodesia, the Lake Chad ivory road and those other safari paths and caravan routes of Africa staked out, every mile of them, with skeletons and the memories of bygone adventurers.

Along the Ngami trail went Chapman and the rest, taking beads and copper, gunpowder, sugar and clothes;

struggling along with the "fever and the ague" for which they had no proper remedies; and then returning with tusks cut from elephants caught by the natives in pits. At that period a trader might be out of touch with his friends at the Cape for three years, while no word of him save rumours of his death drifted westwards to the coast. I covered the ground from Gobabis, the railhead in South-West Africa, to Ngami in three days by motor-car. The track is much as Chapman left it, but the modern car, ruthlessly driven, is capable of penetrating every sandy wilderness and stretch of bush in Africa.

Beside the huge pan shown on the map as Kalkfontein I met a true hermit of the desert. He was an elderly German, living in twin rondavels he had furnished comfortably with the aid of

his own clever hands. The walls were hung with magnificent karosses, with the ostrich-egg shells used by the Bushmen for hoarding water, with quivers, beads, and tortoise shells. I wondered how he lived until I saw his workshop. Muzzle-loaders were stacked on a bench, and the hermit explained that he mended these ancient guns for the people of the native village.

He was nearly seventy, and he had been living in the desert, trekking, hunting, trading, for a quarter of a century. When I asked him about the First Great War and the invasion of South-West Africa he seemed a little vague. I gathered that he had disappeared into the spaces which even war could not reach. The war, I think, must have confirmed his distaste for civilisation. He did not wish to travel beyond the borders of the desert again.

Close to the hermit's huts stand a large cool home and a store. There Miss Sharp keeps house for her brother, the trader. It is a home worthy of more beautiful surroundings, though the hospitality offered could not have been more generous. You have to travel across the hot frontier into Bechuanaland to realise how good a cup of tea can taste, how refreshing the sight of violets in a Kalahari garden can be. Miss Sharp talked of the summer malaria, when the pan is filled with water and the mosquitoes whine against the netting. She pointed out the wells that keep the natives alive in the dry winter; the thatched huts of the Baralong, the "stad" of the rascally thieving Kalahari's and the village of the well-behaved Damaras. These are her brother's customers, and this is Kalkfontein – the glaring white pan,

the three villages, the Sharp domain within the neat stockade, and the abode of the German hermit. A strange setting in which to find an educated woman. Yet Miss Sharp, with her books, her garden, and her home, was not bored. Many a tired and bearded traveller has reason to be thankful for her presence at the little spot shown only on large-scale maps as Kalkfontein.

Among the men of the remote Bechuanaland settlements the remedy for boredom, apparently, is to increase the dose of loneliness. "I just take a gun and get out into the veld for a few days when I feel fed-up," one official told me.

Another man, whose names and achievements are known from the Zambezi to the Molopo, disappears into the desert for months at a stretch.

No one knows where he goes, though he is credited with all the skill and knowledge of a Bushman in finding food and water. He has lived in the territory for so long that there can be few corners he has not explored. But this he does for his own satisfaction and in his own way. I tried to trace him, but the reply was always the same. "He is out 'in the blue' – I don't know when he will be back."

I had heard of the disappearance of Lake Ngami from a previous visitor who informed me with vigour that "Ngami no more resembles a lake than a penny whistle resembles an orchestra." Other members of the expedition were not prepared for the dry yellow reality. As far back as 1896, however, Lugal and Passage trekked to a waterless Ngami. They established the fact that Ngami had finally dried up in

1890, and gathered from the natives the explanation.

A powerful chief, it seems, had his stronghold among the rocks at the southern extremity of the lake. Every year the weaker tribes of the Okavango brought him tributes of corn. They transported the corn on rafts of papyrus grass – large reed platforms built with such skill that cattle, human beings and freight could all travel on them. Such rafts were abandoned at the end of the journey and the grass took root in the mud of the river bank. As a result, streams that had run freely were gradually blocked with vegetation, channels silted and rivers ceased to flow into Ngami.

That queer sequence of events, however, formed only half the story. Guns and gunpowder sold by the early traders now enter the drama. Before

the coming of the white man enormous herds of hippo lumbered about the rivers and lakes, breaking through the thickest tangle of grass like armour-plated battering-rams. Firearms thinned out the hippos and drove many a herd northwards into the swamps. As the natives themselves made no effort to carry out the work previously done for them by the hippos, Ngami became the grassy plain it is today. Only in years of great flood do the rivers overflow sufficiently to send a stream across Ngami. Nothing but a gigantic irrigation scheme would convert Ngami into the lake twenty miles long and ten miles wide that Livingstone saw. Meanwhile the blocking of rivers by rafts continues in the Okavango region – territory so remote that many of the island dwellers have never seen a

white man. Efforts by the government on a small scale to clear certain rivers, however, have been successful. The Tamalakane now flows past the Resident Commissioner's house at Maun as it did years ago, watering many a field of flourishing crops.

There is another legend of the Ngami transformation worth relating, even though it may not be accepted as the full explanation. During the 'sixties of last century, it is said, the Paramount Chief of Ngamiland, named Morimi, became desperate as a result of cattle raids by hostile Bechuanas, slave raids by Arabs, and the disturbing visits of white hunters. Morimi decided to create a barrier against invaders. He led his tribe to a narrow section of the Okavango river and felled hundreds of palm trees so that the leaves dropped into the stream. The flotsam of the

river completed the task. As time passed, the trees accumulated debris, a barrage was formed; and the waters of Okavango, instead of reaching Lake Ngami, were thrown back and became a great delta. Here was an obstacle that deterred raids from the north. The drying up of the lake sent the game away seeking greater waters, thus discouraging the white elephant hunters. It is true that the richest variety of game is now to be found in the swamps, though the expedition I accompanied never went hungry in the Ngami wonderland of small buck and birds.

Some authorities, notably the late Professor Ernest Schwartz, have stated that the rainfall of South Africa has decreased since the waters left Ngami. "South Africa is becoming a Sahara," they say. Ingenious schemes for

restoring the lake and watering the whole Kalahari have been worked out in detail. These plans would cost millions, and no government is likely to spend millions to test a theory. The water system is intricate, and maps are unreliable. A high Bechuanaland official told me that he was unable to grasp the baffling topography until he had flown over the swamps seven times. It is thought that the great Zambezi once fed Ngami, for the ancient area of the lake was 50,000 square miles. A faint river course has been traced leading out of Ngami in a southerly direction and joining at last with the mighty Orange. That is the link between the "lost lake" and the climate of South Africa. Unfortunately the weather records do not go back very far, and it may well be that the present dryness is part of a natural

cycle of two centuries or more. One cannot ignore the native legend which says that some time before 1800 there was no lake.

Magnificent crops of mealies, corn, tobacco and cotton are grown in the old lake area in spite of the lack of surface water. Round the shore, where waves thrown up by storms once pounded, there live several distinct races of people who found refuge there from wars and oppression. The most prosperous are the cattle owning Hereros, five thousand exiles with their principal village at Sehitwa. They arrived about thirty years ago – the parched and haggard survivors of a savage nation that had fought the Germans in South-West Africa. For years that merciless desert war had been waged. The resistance of the

Hereros to the German rule was fierce and at last Von Trotha issued his cruel and desperate extermination order. In the final drive; six German divisions were Rung in a great arc against the retreating Hereros to prevent them from escaping into the Bechuanaland Protectorate with their cattle. One night the German Colonial troops, marching in brown cord uniforms with their ox teams and wagons, sighted the fires of the huge Herero camp. But in the morning the pursuing Germans saw only skins and pots, and in the distance a pillar of dust. The proud Hereros, abandoning everything, had fled into the desert. They made grass fires to delay the chase. Here and there German patrols followed the line of flight. (Long afterwards a Bechuana-land Protectorate Police sergeant who was sent out to the unmapped western

frontier saw German names carved on a huge baobab tree, the names of the troopers who had off-saddled there, and then turned back to their own territory). Several patrols ventured too far and died of thirst.

Among the Hereros the desert exacted a heavy toll. The survivors found a route along an old water-course; they dug up a few moist roots and sucked the tsamma melons where they came upon them; but there was never enough water for that broken legion, and men, women and children dropped by the score day after day. How many came at last to the sanctuary of the Ngami water-holes it is impossible to say. There were no white officials in Ngamiland at that time. Those who reached Ngami with the last of the Herero cattle soon regained their strength and founded a colony in

which the tribal conditions and customs remained unchanged.

There I saw the women wearing the three-pronged cowhide head-pieces that have almost vanished in South-West Africa. They show an excessive fondness for bangles and metal decorations, weighing themselves down with tubing and coils of brass wire. Others were dressed in Victorian clothes, with tight waists and flowing skirts. On that far shore the tall Hereros still worship their ancestors and keep their holy fires blazing. The hunting is good, they have their beehive huts, their milk and grain, horses and guns. Small in numbers among the teeming Batawanas, these Hereros with their memories of old conquests have secured a dominant position. The best cattle and the finest land are theirs.

A few humble Berg Damaras live with their masters, the Hereros, in the Ngami territory. Queer folk, the negroid Berg Damaras, speaking the Hottentot language, knowing nothing of their own origin. For centuries they were slaves, a weak and primitive people without leaders of their own. Even their religion is lost. Yet they possess one art the Hereros have never known, the ability to work in iron. They say that the name Herero is really the sound of a spear whirring towards the enemy. But when a Herero needs a spear, and nowadays when his muzzle-loader is broken, he must go to the Berg Damara craftsman.

Traders at branch stores in Ngamiland may justly claim to be included among the loneliest men in Africa. Natives are employed as assistants, but there is always a white man in charge; and that

man sees few other white faces during a spell of duty lasting two years. Yet there are few who would be willing to change places with any shop assistant.

Trade as I saw it near Lake Ngami was a fascinating affair. A back room was piled high with skins destined for the London market. There were sleek otters, caught in reed traps or speared in the shallow rivers. About fifty of these skins may go into a single coat. Once the traders were paying the natives a sovereign for each perfect skin. Now the demand has been affected by the Karakul fashion and about seven shillings is the price. The skin of the female otter is the more valuable, for though the dog otter is twice the size, it does not possess the dark and shiny qualities of the female. Summer skins are valueless. The winter skin, first scraped with a native

axe, then rubbed interminably by hand, delights the eye of the dresser.

Here is a box of leopard skins, small rough veld leopards or smooth or glossy river leopards – each good specimen worth £5 in the cities of South Africa. The native who risks his life with a blunderbuss is happy to receive half the amount for the skin. Tiger cats, striped like Bengal tigers, red cats, wild cats and jackals are usually hunted with dogs and finished off with knobkieries. By such adventures the native hunter earns half-a-crown a skin. Python skins, fifteen to twenty feet in length, are worth a little more.

Ivory is a commodity appearing in the books of the Kalahari trader, though the price has dropped from twelve to four shillings per lb. While friends of a chief may hunt the elephant with

modern rifles, less influential natives are prepared to bag their tuskers with muzzle-loaders. They aim at the leg, cripple the elephant, and kill with a head shot at point-blank range.

It is said that the guns left by Livingstone are still in use in this territory, and after examining some of the weapons owned by natives I can believe the statement. The date 1760 appears on a few of these incredible fowling-pieces. Stores display typical blunderbusses made in London long ago; and gunpowder, caps and sheets of lead for bullets are details of the stock-in-trade sold every day. Such a gun costs thirty shillings, and has a range of about 300 yards. The wily native, however, has no illusion about his weapon. He relies on stalking rather than on gunpowder.

During the cold winter the trader never allows his stock of blankets to run low. Uniforms are in great demand, not only because decorations please the native taste but also because the shrewd buyer knows that soldiers are given hard-wearing clothes. I was told that it had become difficult to procure the popular, gaudy uniforms of Ruritanian pattern. There is profit for the dealer who can ship a foreign army's outfit to Bechuanaland.

The native as a customer is not difficult to satisfy. All Ngamiland is still a raw territory eager to purchase coveted clothes, foods and boots of the white man up to the limit of spending power. Money is something to be spent immediately. There is a great demand for tea; the only coffee drinkers are the Hereros, who brought the taste with them from South-West

Africa. Sugar-sticks, pocket-knives, mouth-organs, vaseline and soap, brass and copper for bangles, salt and shawls – such is the array on the trader's shelves. Cigarettes are smoked only by the more prosperous natives; but the craving for tobacco is universal, and many tribes grow tobacco first, food crops afterwards.

Thus native cattle and the skins of wild animals are converted, more or less by direct barter, into manufactured goods from Britain and South Africa. The trader lives well and forgets that he is hundreds of miles away from the nearest railway line. He, too, feels the spell of the forests as he handles their riches.

Once the Batawana tribe lived near the lake. There is an alarming custom in this country, however, which demands

that when the old chief dies his kraal must be burnt and his followers move away to some other place. For this reason the Bechuanaland maps give the impression of busy highways pleasantly dotted with villages where the traveller may seek refreshment. Often I thought I had lost the way as I drove through Ngamiland with my map of vanished settlements. In 1915, I learnt, the Batawanas had abandoned their lake "capital" and moved fifty miles eastward to the present seat of government at Maun. The British officials, always anxious to humour native whim, moved with them and built a new Imperial Reserve; but they informed the Chief that there must be no more sudden changes. Batawanas still inhabit the woods of Ngami. These off shoots of Khama's tribe are idle folk, supported by the cattle they

inherited, wearing European clothes, harmless enough but without charm in their semi-civilised state.

Finally there are the Bayeye, the fishermen who once caught their food in Lake Ngami and now exist more or less as Bushmen. They talk the Bushman language. To them the lake is "Gabee" or "n'gabe," the Giraffe Lake, a clear indication of the origin of the name. Giraffes still feed among the kameeldoorn trees that share the landscape with grotesque baobabs and umbrella-shaped mimosas. But the hippos that were flung on to the shores of Lake Ngami in stormy weather have departed. No crocodiles await their victims in the reeds. Somewhere in the forest there may be a wizened old Bushman who saw Livingstone standing in wonder at the edge of the great water. But the Lake Ngami that

Livingstone gazed upon is now only a memory of the very old people of the lake, a sight Africa will not see again.

“Change direction right-right wheel! Come on, you baboons. Halt! Order harrumph!”

The voices that sounded across the sandy parade ground carried the penetrating quality of a British army sergeant-major. When I looked out from my netted veranda, however, I saw a black lance-corporal (acting and unpaid) drilling a squad of dark-skinned constables of the Bechuanaland Protectorate Police.

This remarkable force probably covers a larger area than any other police service of equal strength in the world. A dozen white officers, two dozen white sergeants and 230 native

N.C.O.'s, mounted troopers and constables patrol a country about the size of France and still partly unexplored. They drill like Guardsmen, these sturdy black policemen with their upturned felt hats, blue jerseys, leather belts, shorts and puttees. Most of the native races of the Protectorate are to be found in their ranks, Bushman, Bechuana and Bamangwato, with stocky, muscular men brought over from Basutoland.

I think that even recent reports in the files of the “B.P.P.” must contain more stirring adventure than one expects to find in modern South Africa. Tales of forced marches and strange encounters, of desperate remedies and lonely posts – all these I heard told casually by the sergeants of the force.

One outpost of the force on the northern frontier is so remote that the

sergeant in charge has no certainty of seeing a white visitor during the whole period of duty there – two years. If you travel on horseback, the journey takes a fortnight from Maun. (Half a day, of course, by the despised aeroplane.) They call the place Mahembo, and it lies close to the Caprivi Strip, a lawless finger of territory not long ago where white gun-runners and black robbers flourished unchecked. Supplies are so difficult to obtain that the sergeant must take everything with him – 15,000 cigarettes, tea, sugar and other groceries on the same scale. Yet they find men who fit the job and like it; strong men who apply to return when their leave is over.

When the sergeant patrols the rivers and swamps he uses “makorros” – a fleet of three dug-out canoes. The

hippo is the main danger in these waters; a cow with a calf is usually aggressive, and then the canoe traveller finds a huge body thrusting at his craft from below and finally biting it in half. So there must be canoes in reserve to pick up the victims of such encounters. A large dug-out canoe holding three paddlers and three passengers costs £4 10s. In such a canoe the sergeant at Mahembo has covered the 358 miles to Maun in 22 days.

News travels fast in this territory, and the movements of a white official on patrol are always known (as they are in every other tropical corner of Africa) long before he reaches a village. It is difficult to explain this fact, for drums are not widely used in the Bechuanaland Protectorate. Is it telepathy?

Recover or die – that is the position of a man who falls ill in a place like Mahembo. Weeks may pass before a runner returns with a doctor. Even the district headquarters such as Maun or Ghanzi are incredibly remote. Maun is 200 miles to the north of Ghanzi, but to send a letter from one place to the other by the regular mail service takes weeks. The letter leaves by motor-lorry for Palapye Road on the railway; it travels through Mafeking, reaches Windhoek, then goes by branch railway to Gobabis. There the process slows up. A cart struggles across the frontier and finally a pack donkey ambles into Ghanzi. The expedition I accompanied carried a letter from Mann to the police sergeant at Ghanzi in one day.

One morning I sat in a police sergeant's office-hut in Ngamiland. A

circular thatched roof, white-washed walls with a great map of the territory, blankets over the tables, netted doors and windows, cases of Mark VII cartridges and rifles – such was the setting. Two native constables had arrived after a patrol in the swamp region, a patrol of about 700 miles, mainly on foot, that had lasted ten weeks.

“Come in-single file,” ordered the sergeant. The men stood to attention and the native lance-corporal, acting as interpreter, cleared his throat.

“Any news?”

“No news, Morena.”

News in these parts means police news – murders and witchcraft, game poaching and serious crime. Then one of the constables narrated without emotion the story of a journey worthy

of a Royal Geographical Society's medal, while the sergeant tried to follow him on a large scale-map.

"We came to a large island in the swamps, Morena. Some of the people said they had seen the police many years ago; others declared they had heard of the police, but had never seen them. Afterwards we came to a place where the people had never heard of a white man. They were wild people. They did not understand us when we spoke of the hut tax.

"At first we could not approach these people. The women remained in the village, but the men cleared out when they saw our uniforms. All the time we used our fly switches – plenty of tsetse there, and much water going down the river. We talked quietly and gently to the women. Next day an old man returned, and we talked still more

gently, and shot a buck so that the people might have meat. Then the old man brought the others back.

"After that we came to a village called Mombo, where even the old men have never paid taxes. They were ignorant people, Morena – they know nothing, they just exist. But they have gardens and are not hungry. Some hunt by surrounding game and chasing them into the water with spears. Others have muzzle-loaders. One man possessed a Martini and many slaves. There are cattle on the island, but they can be taken off only at low water, through one place where there are no tsetse flies."

"Was there sickness among the people?" inquired the sergeant.

"No, Morena, they were fine and healthy."

“No sickness at all?”

“Well, many of them had lost their hands and feet.”

The sergeant produced a photograph. “Is that it?” The constables nodded. “Leprosy,” said the sergeant. “What do these people eat?”

The constable referred to his notebook. “They were making nets such as Morena puts on the tennis court,” he replied. “Also there are buffalo – thousands, thousands. The buffalo enter the village and most of the people have broken arms and ribs. The malaria is bad, too.”

“But they are all fine and healthy,” recalled the sergeant with sarcasm. “Well, where did you go next?”

“We crossed the river and made a fire under a tree. A man came up and

chased us, saying: ‘That is my tree – I will not share my shade with anyone.’ So we moved to another tree and the tampan (poisonous insects) drove us away. Then we went back to the man and spoke strongly, asking for shelter.”

“Then I suppose he offered you milk and food, and sent young girls to wait on you?” queried the sergeant.

“No, no, Morena – he told us to go into the kraal and sleep with the cattle. He was a very queer man and disliked the police.”

“How did you cross the rivers?”

The shorter of the two constables answered. “I jumped on the tall man’s back. Sometimes we used the floating grass, or makorros.”

“The people have makorros, then?”

“Yes, but not good ones. They guard their makorro trees jealously. ‘This tree is my tree,’ a man will say. They wear skins and have never seen blankets. They are River Bushmen, and very shy people.”

At the end of the report the sergeant opened a ledger and glanced up.

“You have been away a long time, and have much money due to you.”

“Ai!” assented the constables eagerly.

“A pity – I have eaten it,” declared the humorist in the native idiom. “About turn. Quick march!” The men were not deceived. They went out chuckling.

All the exploring is not left to native constables. White officers and sergeants have ventured far into the sand-dunes of the “Great Thirst” in the

south and the unmapped, unhealthy bush of the north.

I remember a sergeant pointing out certain places on the map which he had proved to be non-existent – water-holes and even mountains. During a long trek on horseback to the western frontier the sergeant found a small settlement of Hereros, descendants of the people driven out of South-West Africa. “What is that grass you wear on your head?” they asked. They had never seen the straight hair of a white man before.

The hospitality of officials and police at isolated centres of government in Bechuanaland is a memorable experience. I shall often think of the camp at Maun, under a great fig-tree beside the Tamalakane river, where the birds went by in rocket bursts, the blue jays settled on the bushes,

kingfishers in the river, Marabou storks and pelicans strutted in the green reeds.

Here within the thorn boma the police boys brought a tent with mosquito curtains and a bathroom. Tables and chairs appeared, and a box of pawpaw's and oranges for the expedition that had come through the dusty desert. At night there were the frogs. "Kwa-kraw-dru-u-mm." It was difficult in the dry, cool July weather to imagine the summer menace of malaria and the quinine sulphate pills at sundown. Yet my friend the sergeant lived in a netted enclosure on the veranda of his thatched house, and slept always beneath mosquito curtains.

In the fresh early morning the boys bring tea. A shout for water, a bath. Then a canter along the river banks

while a crocodile raises a wary eye and sinks cautiously to await other prey. Breakfast, and a visit to the gaol to see the prisoners turn out for their day of brick-making. Office duty, ration accounts, or a few hours in court as prosecutor occupy the sergeant's morning. Before lunch he changes into civilian clothes, according to the custom of the service. At half-past four in the afternoon, if there are no, emergencies, the sergeant may take his shot-gun and bring down a few wild duck for dinner.

For a man who enjoys shooting there are few countries in the world offering such a variety and abundance of game. A sergeant on patrol receives twenty rounds of free ammunition a month to fill his pot. The allowance for a native constable is ten rounds, the idea at headquarters being either that natives

are more accurate marksmen or that they need less meat. When there are many carriers to feed a hippo or buffalo may be selected; at other times a springbok will suffice.

On mail days the police sergeant helps to sort the letters. He is postmaster, too, at small stations, and he may be called upon to inspect the roads and deal with agricultural problems.

Before the mails were carried between Maun and Palapye by motor-lorry, pack donkeys were employed. They tell the story of an unhappy occasion when the donkeys were stampeded by a herd of zebras. His Majesty's mails disappeared into the bush, and though a long search followed, the bags were never recovered.

At night in these outposts conversation has been widened by the radio. But

after the news has come through and the loudspeaker has been switched off, the talk still returns to those queer bygone characters who achieved local fame in adventures with lions or leopards, in alcoholic feats or repartee with high but unpopular officials. A man with a memory could almost make a book of one such evening's gossip. Such a work, however, would not find favour with my friend the sergeant, and as I hope to see him again one day in a less remote atmosphere, I shall not attempt it. Only one who has spent years in that fascinating and little-known land to the south of the Zambezi can tell the full story of the Bechuanaland Protectorate Police.

CHAPTER 13

OLD AFRICA UNCHANGED

IF YOU love old Africa and the last outposts, there is another long, hard trek before you. Such a trek as I made in the winter of 1938, from Cape Town to Ovamboland. It will be worth the struggle. Old Africa is there with face unchanged, the most bewitching scene on earth.

Officials posted to Ovamboland usually have to look at the map. No accurate map of the country has ever been drawn, but the atlas will reveal an outline of the most northerly territory influenced (one cannot say governed) by the Union of South Africa. It is roughly two-thirds the size of Ireland. While the Germans ruled South-West Africa they never penetrated Ovamboland, and no one who was not a missionary was permitted to

enter. Only in 1915, at the request of the Ovambos themselves, did the Union Government send officials and grant it protection. Since then cannibalism and torture, rain sacrifices and wars have been discouraged by wise resident commissioners. He would be a bold man who would say that such savagery will not occur again, though it would not go unpunished. Meanwhile the 12,000 people of Ovamboland till the sandy fields peacefully in a world of their own – a world which would survive if Europe perished.

Before I set out from Windhoek for Ovamboland I consulted the man who knows the Ovambos better than any other living person. He is Major C. H. L. Hahn, M.B.E. grandson of the missionary-explorer who travelled in the territory and then Native Commis-

sioner. Major Hahn went to South-West Africa with the invading army in 1914. He has now been in Ovamboland for thirty years, and I do not think he would enjoy a transfer. Deeply sun-tanned, with dark, greying hair, Major Hahn gives an instant impression of energy. The Ovambos call him “Shongola,” which means sjambok. As he does not use a sjambok to maintain law and order, it is obvious that “Shongola” is the native description of the man himself – as strong and lively as a rawhide whip. I asked him whether there was anything that made the Ovambos stand out from other tribes.

“They are the oldest settled people in Africa,” replied Major Hahn. “For five centuries at least the Ovambos have been in possession of their land. The Zulus on the other side of South Africa

are newcomers compared with their cousins, the Ovambos. So that in Ovamboland, especially in the heathen kraals, you will see a people living almost exactly as their ancestors lived before the white man came.”

It is not easy to secure a permit to enter Ovamboland, and when I read the document I found a formidable list of prohibitions. I could not trade or “interfere with the natives” or take a dog with me. I must not cause a grass fire. I was instructed about carrying sufficient petrol, water and food, and told that I must find shelter for myself. But when I learnt that my rifle was to be sealed before leaving the “police zone,” I pleaded for meat for the pot. (It is unwise to point out that travellers to Ovamboland have been mauled by leopards and lions, because in the



Otjikoto crater lake - the “pool of death” near Tsumeb, South-West Africa. One of the landmarks on route to Ovamboland.

official view, no unprovoked wild beast has ever attacked a man.)

A high official considered the case. Next day he gave the verdict. “I have been going into your problem of meat”

he declared gravely. "At Ondonga there is an interpreter. I suggest that his influence with Chief Martin and the headmen will enable you to procure – to purchase, that is to say – a goat."

I dared not glance at the faces of the friends who were to accompany me on this goat-eating expedition. Useless to point out that a German prince had previously been granted permission to shoot an elephant, whereas we asked only for guinea-fowl or buck. The goat, and methods of preparing it for the table, became a topic that lightened the drive into the north. If we had not later encountered the memorable hospitality of white men and women in lonely places, we might really have been forced to procure – that is to say, purchase – a goat! With the influence, of course, of the interpreter.

It was the dry season, but Ondonga was not reached without an effort. There was a day when the car covered only fifty miles, and we slept beside it, too exhausted to flick off the mosquitoes. One incident showed that we had passed beyond the "police zone" into a wild country. All spare water for the radiator had been used, and we were searching the track ahead anxiously for signs of natives. I saw a dark form moving in the bush and raised an arm. The man hesitated. I held out tobacco. If I had walked towards him he would have taken cover. Now he came forward shyly. He was naked; he held a bow and arrow; and when I gave him a cigarette he did not know how to light it. A fair test of a savage, I think. Soon he was joined by two wondering companions. When I made gestures of drinking they

brought water from a muddy pool. Possibly they were Bushmen, for they spoke a language of clicks and grunts, but in appearance they were unlike any Bushmen I had seen previously. With this and other weird assistance we came at last to the thatched houses of Ondonga, headquarters of Major Hahn.

Ondonga is the most remote official settlement in South-West Africa. During the rainy season it would be hard to find, anywhere in Africa, a more isolated outpost. Donkey wagons and camels are still used when the road is impassable for motor-lorries to carry freight and mails from railhead at Tsumeb. Lions attack the tasty donkeys, and an English missionary told me that he had lost seven on one journey. Motor-lorries are often long delayed. One year the white exiles of

Ovamboland received their Christmas letters in April and their parcels in June.

For these reasons, and others, Ondonga has been made a "six months' station" for certain officials. Nearly all stay longer at their own request. Very soon the newcomer meets every white person on the station. Major Hahn has two administrative assistants at Ondonga; there is the district surgeon and a plague inspector; a postmaster-wireless operator; and beyond the official area are the concession store-keepers, a labour recruiting manager, and the missionaries. Seventy miles further on, at Oshikongo, "port of entry" from Angola, lives an assistant native commissioner and his family. There are no more white people in the territory; settlers are not allowed in

Ovamboland. I know few other areas in Africa where the white population is so small.

Though Ondonga lies well within the tropics, water is the main difficulty during the rainless winter. Drinking water must be collected in large tanks and rationed. Baths are filled with a dark and dubious salty mixture from holes and pools. Both water and milk are regarded as dangerous, and many families used tinned milk only.

The homes of Ondonga are far more comfortable than the dwellings one might expect in such a wilderness. Furniture is transported at government expense. Almost everyone has a radio set and a refrigerator burning paraffin. White ants attack the woodwork and at last destroy it. But while these houses stand, they suit the climate. Poles and slats of tambuti wood support the

ceilings. Then there are layers of sacking to keep out the dust, palm leaves soaked in arsenic to defeat the ants, a mud covering six inches deep to shut out the heat, and finally a heavy thatch of corn stalks. Large spiders are encouraged to live in every room, feeding on mosquitoes.

Catering, among the white community, is a problem often solved with the aid of rifles and cans. Ducks may be shot nearby, and springbok on the plains to the south. The thin Ovambo chicken, costing three pence, is no luxury; though two thousand chickens are mournfully consumed in Ondonga every year. One man tried to grow vegetables, kept an account of his expenditure, and found that he could produce tomatoes at £5 apiece. Potatoes may be obtained from Tsumeb, but the freight rate is 12/6 per

100 lb. It is necessary to look well ahead when sending for supplies – a child's cot, ordered by telegram, arrived four months later.

So it cannot be denied that Ondonga is isolated. People who have not the right temperament find they are going "bush balmy," to use the local phrase. Parents with young children dread illnesses and wonder how the education problem will be solved. Only the children are care-free. They learn the Ovambo language rapidly, and I heard a father call upon his five-year-old son at lunch one day to settle the pronunciation of a word.

The stranger finds it difficult to make himself understood. Once a South African visitor wished to talk to a Portuguese official from Angola. He spoke in Afrikaans to an Ovambo who had learnt Afrikaans while working in

the south. The Ovambo then translated the words to another native who spoke Ovambo and Portuguese. The conversation lasted a long time, but business was done.

Finnish missionaries learn Ovambo before they leave Finland. You may wonder why these men and women, preachers and doctors, are to be found in a land so different from their own cold Finland. Hahn, the missionary, after his return to Europe, pleaded the needs of the Ovambos before many mission societies. The Finns listened with sympathy, and for seventy years these simple, indomitable people have laboured in a country of war and famine and plague. Their methods have not always fitted the official policy. But everyone must admire the medical help, the well-organised hospitals given by the Finns to tribes

suffering from the most painful diseases of the tropics. These bearded men and plainly-dressed, toiling medical women can be proud of their record in Ovamboland.

“For twelve months during the First Great War we were cut off from the world,” Mr. Alho, head of the mission, told me. “No letters, no supplies, no money. We lived on the country as best we could, without coffee or sugar or groceries. Many missionaries became ill. But the hospitals remained open, the teaching went on.” Patients are never turned away. They arrive with their families and food supplies, and all are housed by the mission. Thus, apart from doctors and nurses, no hospital staff is needed, for the relatives do the work. About a hundred patients are treated every day at the Ondonga mission alone. Many come

in suffering from burns, the result of rolling over into the fire while asleep or drunk.

“Take a knife and cut out the pain,” an Ovambo will say to the mission doctors. “I am not a child. If I cry out, do not listen.” A woman doctor told me that she once spent a strenuous hour extracting a tooth. At the end the Ovambo remarked: “I am sorry to have given all this trouble – your arms must be very tired.”

In the early days these Finns risked their lives when they settled among the Ovambos. Stations were burnt, missionaries fled – and boldly returned. As recently as 1917, when the crops failed, they saw the roads piled high with skeletons. Famine rations from the south were held up for six weeks by floods. The people waited and died.

One of the mission's first converts, an Ovambo girl, was taken to Finland and baptised there. (The Finns are Lutherans.) She learnt to speak Finnish, a queer contrast with her own Bantu language.

Other missions in Ovamboland are not so well supported as the old Finnish stations. I called on Father Tobias at St. Mary's, the Anglican Mission in the Ukuanyama tribal area, and found him decorating his church with beans, pumpkins, corn and millet for the harvest festival. Much has been done at St. Mary's with slender resources. Mrs Tobias, formerly a London hospital sister, managed the mission hospital. There, too, I met Mr. MacDonald, a Yorkshire man and a remarkable mechanic. MacDonald was running a motor garage in Leeds. By chance he attended a missionary

meeting, heard for the first time of the Ovamboland enterprise, and offered his services. The skilled volunteer was accepted, and now he has gained a great reputation as a mechanical expert in Ovamboland. His workshop, built up with broken-down engines, scraps and oddments, turns out furniture of professional quality. In the wilds, where spare parts are unobtainable, he revives antiquated and wrecked motor-cars. No repair is beyond his ingenuity. MacDonald once covered the two hundred miles from Tsumeb to the mission during the rainy season in six weeks. There were days when a run of half a mile in swamp and mud ranked as an achievement.

Such is Ovamboland, with steppes of high yellow grass, the marula trees giving their dead black shade, Mopani trees and belts of palms, wild figs and

patches of cultivation. There are no hills, and hardly a stone, within the borders. A meteorite, falling there, was taken to a chief's kraal and worshipped; and a professor, who heard of the find and went to study it, narrowly escaped execution.

I have shown a little of the lives of the white people, under their thatch and behind their netted verandas, in Ovamboland. Now enter the stockaded kraal of a headman and see how the self supporting Ovambos rule and nourish themselves.

“Kaluvi is your father. If there is trouble, go first to him. If Kaluvi cannot make you happy, go to the council of headmen. From them you may come to me, for I am also your father. The road to Oshikongo is an open road.”

Thus the white official spoke before Kaluvi the headman and the wise men of the tribe in a great kraal in Ovamboland. The interpreter, gesticulating, rapped out the white man's words. Old Kaluvi, shrewd face attentive, shaven head nodding, made-patterns in the sand where he squatted at our feet.

It was my first experience of an Ovambo indaba. I had driven north almost to the Angola frontier. By happy chance the official, stationed at Oshikongo among the Ukuanyama tribe, was returning a ceremonial visit soon after I arrived.

Here was the real African scene – a land still ruled by tribal law, with the guidance of alert and experienced officials as the last resort. Among the headmen was an old fellow with wrinkled, humorous face, Wanja by

name. Wanja brought memories of the Ovamboland of twenty-five years ago; for he had fought in Mandume's bodyguard, and Mandume was a despot as cruel as Chaka.

The voices droned on. "My eyes and ears are kept open by the headmen," I heard. But I still gazed at Wanja, wondering what he had seen in the days of Mandume's blood-lust...

"Prisoners must die." Mandume has spoken and the hired Bushmen executioners step forward and drag the captives out to strangle them. Sometimes Mandume spared their lives, but forced the prisoners to roast meat, held in their hands, over charcoal fires. He mutilated those who came before him for punishment, and once he threatened his own mother with death.

Yet this Mandume was well liked by his people on both sides of the frontier. (The Ovambos recognise no boundary signs.) He fell out with the Portuguese, fought them, and was driven south out of Angola. From the British side he raided cattle in Portuguese territory, robbed and murdered. Then Mandume made a fatal mistake. He approached a South African official noisily and impudently, with armed followers, as a menace. Major Manning, then Native Commissioner, sent a runner to the nearest telegraph office: "Position is now serious and absolutely necessary to despatch a force powerful enough and quickly to crush opposition and completely establish authority."

Mandume was invited to surrender. He sent a message: "If the English want me I am here, and they can come and

fetch me here. I am a man, not a woman, and I will fight till my last bullet is gone.”

So the punitive expedition reached Mandume’s country in February, 1917. The men were going down fast with malaria, horses were dying daily. But a battle followed, and Mandume was killed by Maxim fire.

That was Ovamboland within the memory of Major Hahn, who was the expedition’s intelligence officer. Bombing planes and armoured cars were up there in 1932; but Chief Ipumbu was removed without casualties. “A personal affair,” they call it in Ovamboland.

“Before, if a man were to visit another man, he had to take with him a knobkerrie and a knife,” remarked an Ovambo chief recently. “Today there

is no need for weapons. We are satisfied, and we hope the Union Government is as well. We want the Union Government to stay here.”

So the natives of Ovamboland are contented in their stockaded kraals. I strolled away from the indaba, with a guide, to see the maze of pointed stakes within which every headman dwells. Every family, as a matter of fact, lives within stockades; but only the larger kraals are impressive. There are no villages in Ovamboland. A family cultivates a corn patch, and raises a roughly-made circular wooden palisade, often under cover of the grain, about fifteen feet in diameter. Kaluvi’s stockade must have been seventy feet in diameter, a labyrinth from which a stranger would not easily emerge. Built mainly for defence in the past, these kraals

protect the people and the cattle from lions. It is cool in the narrow corridors. Sandy enclosures are clean, and the whole queer maze is designed with the skill of a professional architect.

The chief or headman has his sleeping hut near the centre, like a thatched beehive with mud-plastered walls. Each wife (and I met a headman with seven) is given her own sleeping hut, living room, kitchen and grain store. A quiet place, shut off by a double stockade, is reserved for indabas; I saw about a thousand people waiting in a larger enclosure to hear the words of the white official. Aerial views of a large Ovambo kraal show ring after ring of units set aside for wives and men of the bodyguard, servants and relations; huts for milk and wine, meat and beer; a storeroom for drums and a place for stamping corn; all linked by

the intricate system of alleyways. One kraal (at Omedi) covers an area of 86,000 square yards; yet you might miss the place entirely if you did not know where to look. The outer fence of thorn-bush, and the fields of corn and millet, camouflage the great stockade.

When I returned to the indaba, it was time for the corn beer to be served, and the roast chicken in pots. I had lunched admirably just before the ceremony; but we had to make a show of pulling a chicken apart. The beer arrived in a huge gourd. It was sampled by a servant, to avoid the risk of poison, and ladled into decorated wooden cups with woven fly-covers. I was able to drink half a cup. A teetotal official (if there is one) cannot avoid the ceremony of the beer – one refusal would spoil the party.

As the beer went round, the circle of crouching headmen and elders grew larger, and more jovial. Kaluvi relaxed, beamed on his supporters, and joked at their expense. The interpreter translated: "These fellows are all about my age. But they walk with bent backs, their heads sag, they are finished, and I am all right! "Kaluvi had to allow twelve wives to depart when he became a Christian, and now he has one. In a heathen kraal I met the seven wives of a headman Nehemiah (a government interpreter), and I learnt about Ovambo women from him. His wives wore ox-hide skirts. They were typical of the shapely women of Ovamboland, with figures moulded by work in the fields. A man may go hunting; he may drink beer and visit his friends; certainly he spends half the year amusing himself.

The women stamp the corn, carry the water, collect firewood – and live longer than the men.

Yet the Ovambo woman does not regard herself as oppressed. If her husband offends her she can walk out of the kraal with her corn and her belongings and leave him to fend for himself. As each wife puts something into the husband's basket, an unpopular man may soon feel hungry. He is forced to send deputations of friends to persuade the haughty woman to return. There is no system of lobola (bride payment) in Ovamboland. ALL inheritance is through the women.

Nehemiah's wives wore copper bangles and ivory charms. One wife displayed the mysterious "Omba" shells which are gathered at a secret place on the coast of Angola, and



The seven wives of an Ovambo headman in their finery - oxhide skirts, copper bangles and ivory charms.

treasured by Ovambo women as though they were diamonds. An “Omba” shell is worth ten shillings. The chief wife had dressed her hair in Ukuanyama fashion, with mud, ochre,

fat and bark, forming a thorny crown. (Ombalantu women may be distinguished by enormous plaits of palm fibre, while the Ondongas have long artificial tresses falling to the ground.) Most startling of decorations in this parade was a massive anklet, almost as heavy as a convict’s leg iron. There was not one civilised touch about those seven stately women.

Grain harvested by the women must be stored in huge baskets and sealed with mud against white ants and weevils. There must be a reserve for time of famine. The land is not so productive as other tropical territories, but there are compensations. During the rainy season three-fourths of Ovamboland are flooded, and then little fish are caught by the thousand among the cornstalks, while larger

barbel are found in wells and water-holes.

The marula tree yields a fruit from which strong wine is made. Under a wise tribal law no man may carry a knife, spear or club during the marula wine season.

It is more difficult to explain the tribal customs which prevent a chief from crossing the boundaries of his own area. Even men like Mandume respected this tradition. Thus no two chiefs can ever hope to meet. The native commissioner cannot summon all the chiefs of Ovamboland to his headquarters. In the past, a chief sending an invading army into another area was unable to lead his men. When the disobedient Impumbu fled from the Union forces, his followers left him immediately he crossed the tribal

boundary. "You are no longer chief," they said.

An old people, the Ovambos. Some authorities declare that they are offshoots of the Zulus, and point to the exact similarity of certain words – "nyama" (meat) and "unvula" (rain). Major Hahn has heard a legend that they migrated westwards from the Zambezi with the Hereros. In this country the grain-loving Ovambos found the soil they sought; while the cattle-owning Hereros pushed on southwards in quest of grass. But no legend accounts for the Arab features, the fine noses and un-African eyes which are to be seen so often in Ovamboland. On the strength of these faces ethnologists have given Egypt as the land of the Ovambos' origin.

They have all the magical beliefs of an ancient, primitive race. "Witchdoctors

are not flourishing at the moment, but the Ovambos would return to witchcraft readily enough in times of calamity,” a missionary told me. “During the great drought of 1928 they killed a child as a sacrifice to the rain goddess – but they crossed the border into Angola for the ceremony.”

A man still believes he is bewitched if he has a long illness. All Ovambos fear the dark. There are a thousand omens in the land – comets bring plague, the cooing of a dove near a headman’s hut means a death, while a python found across a path is a sign of prosperous days for the owner of cattle.

Ovambo medical skill is not of a high order. A government doctor with nine years’ experience of the country told me that he had never discovered a native remedy to compare with the

European treatment for the same complaint. He had seen deep cuts sewn up cleverly with palm fibre; but he believed the sun, not the witchdoctor, saved the patients from sepsis. One Ovambo medicine, I learnt, often proved fatal – the tobacco juice given to sick children.

Similarly the Ovambos possess no great skill with the drums, the “bush telegraph” that works with such weird efficiency in other corners of Africa. Nevertheless, several types of drums are found, including long, wooden drums with slits, such as I had seen in the Congo. A heathen headman informed me that drums with a range of about six miles were beaten by hand to announce the death of a chief, the marriage of a chief’s daughter, a dance, or the approach of an official.

Only a simple message would be understood.

One missionary, lacking a bell, decided to beat the congregation to church with the aid of a drum. He abandoned the idea when native converts told him that the drums were most commonly used to herald a dance; not the sort of dance any missionary would care to attend.

In one or two remote kraals of chiefs and headmen in Ovamboland you may find a fire of green Mopani logs smouldering. No man warms himself at this fire, and no woman dares to place a cooking pot over the embers. This is the holy fire of the chief. It is tended by two trustworthy old men, and though it often burns low, it must be kept alive. From this fire the whole tribe light torches and carry them away to start the fires in their own

kraals. Only when the chief dies is the holy fire left unattended. And the fire sticks are not rubbed again until a new chief comes to rule the tribe.

“Guns bring trouble – hand in your guns and I will protect you.” That was the advice given years ago by Major Hahn. And such is his influence in the most remote tribal areas in South-West Africa that thousands of treasured guns lie heaped in the armoury at Odonga. Guns are not unlawful weapons, but they are still handed in voluntarily.

Two thousand guns I saw there one day, each gun with a story. Mausers and muskets, Martini-Henrys, Snyders, modern Winchesters and Remingtons – stacked almost to the roof, they were, and reeking with the strong meat of African adventure. In this gun-collector’s paradise I stared at

weapons a century old, and dreamed among them.

War and treacherous ambush, petty feud and dangerous hunt – these guns of the Ovambos had sent bullet and shot whistling over the plains. For nearly eighty years they had played their deadly parts in every phase of the life of a nation. One or two, perhaps, had once been owned by Sir Francis Galton and the great Andersson, the first white men to set foot in Ovamboland. Those rusty elephant guns – were they ever loaded by Frank Green, or Ericsson the Swede, the bold ivory hunters who rescued Andersson from thirst only to watch him die from fever and wounds.

It is possible to fill in some of the gaps. Those army Mausers bearing the Royal Crown of Portugal; surely they were looted over the frontier in

Angola, snatched from dead soldiers when the mud fort was rushed and the garrison massacred. There was unofficial war along this border between the Germans and Portuguese in 1915, long before Portugal joined the Allies; and the watchful Ovambos preyed like jackals on the victims. No doubt this German officer's Mauser pistol is a relic of that queer campaign.

But whence came this battered French "chassepot," a muzzleloader that may have seen the Siege of Paris? And who was Botha? His name, without initials, was carved deeply in the butt of an old fashioned shotgun. There are many Bothas in South Africa, but this must have been a Botha of "Voortrekker" breed, a forgotten Botha who ventured beyond unknown veld horizons and may be traced only by this gun. One of those brave spirits, I think, who

travelled to Angola with the “Thirstland Trek” in the ‘seventies. Their wagon tracks are still marked by the heaps of stones where they left their dead.

Martin-Henry carbines are to be found in the armoury by the score, and Major Hahn is still pleased when he receives one. The Martini-Henry block action breech loader gives little trouble, and is thus particularly dangerous in savage hands.

Your skilled Ovambo craftsman, however, is not defeated by a jammed gun. There are metal-workers who can make any part and repair any defect. The ill-fated Chief Mandume once captured a small field-gun from the Portuguese, with a number of shells. The breech-lock was missing, but Mandume set his smiths to work with primitive bellows, anvils and ham-

mers. A new part was constructed, and after several shots had been fired, the Ovambo breech lock was found to have stood the strain remarkably well.

Tower muskets of hammer-and-cup design, blunderbusses, trade weapons known in West Africa as Dane guns or Adacca guns – all these have found



Ovambo metal-workers with their primitive bellows.
their way into Ovamboland by devious ways. Gun-running was a profitable business along the border for many years. The “smoke traders” carried back ivory in exchange. And as there

is no guard along the border, the romantic-sounding but really sordid traffic still persists on a small scale.

A Dane gun is a flint-lock affair of iron with a barrel about four feet long, a one-inch bore and a terrific kick. Only a reckless man or a hungry native would dare to fire the charge of black powder. It will discharge lead pellets, scrap-iron, stones or wire telegraph wire when obtainable. When hunting big game with a Dane gun the sportsman thrusts a poisoned arrow or short spear into the barrel, stalks his elephant and fires at point-blank range.

I saw powder-horns and native cartridge-belts of ox hide in that room, modern cartridges refilled with Ovambo explosives; woodwork carved by Ovambos to fit Lee Metford and Lee Enfield barrels; Steyr rifles,

Spandaus, every firearm from before Waterloo to the latest sporting rifle. More than six thousand guns have passed through that armoury since Major Hahn has been in Ovamboland. Museums have been generously supplied. Yet the disarmament cannot be complete; there must be guns still hoarded in the outlying kraals of the country.

Peaceful persuasion, as I have said, brought many guns to the armoury. In times of famine Major Hahn has exchanged guns for grain. That system added enormously to the heap in the armoury. The Ovambo is also encouraged to pay his annual head tax of five shillings in corn instead of cash. A store of 16,000 bags of corn is now kept in the official granaries, ready for the next famine. But when that calamity descends on the land, I

am sure that more: guns of last century will be taken from their hiding places and the weapons in the armoury will rise still higher. Game is returning to the settled tribal areas of Ovamboland as a result of disarmament. Before the reduction of fire-arms huge drives were carried out, and it became necessary to go far afield to shoot gemsbok and springbok, eland and wildebeest. I asked an Ovambo headman how the people would kill elephant without guns. He looked at me in surprise. "In the ordinary way," he replied. "One man creeps up with a special kind of knife and cuts a sinew in the elephant's hind leg. The others shoot with poisoned arrows. We track the elephant until it dies."

Sir Francis Galton was probably the first white man to demonstrate fire-arms to the Ovambos, during his

journey in 1851. He declared that the natives ridiculed guns at that time, comparing them unfavourably with arrows. “When we throw an assegai or shoot an arrow, we see it going through the air,” they pointed out. “Your guns simply give out fire, and such fire cannot kill.”

Galton then took careful aim at a duck, and killed it. The natives were frightened. They thought the flash caused death, and could not understand the invisible missile.

They had another and more tragic lesson six years later, when they attacked Hahn the missionary and Green the elephant hunter, and were decisively beaten at the “Battle of Ondonga.” During a running fight that lasted two hours, eleven Ovambos were killed. Arms were first used by natives in Ovamboland in the ‘sixties

of last century. Tribal wars were being waged with axe and assegai. At Ondonga the cunning Chief Shikongo, remembering Green’s victory, sent an emissary to seek the help of Hottentots with firearms. When the Hottentots arrived from the south, victory for Shikongo was easy. Having learnt to use fire-arms, the treacherous Shikongo turned on the little band of Hottentot allies and massacred them. The armed Ondongas soon became the dominant tribe – a position they still hold in these days of disarmament.

Many African natives will take an oath on their guns, just as a Christian holds up the Bible. But the Ovambos are returning to the primitive weapons of the tribe, of Old Africa. For them the aloe-poisoned arrow, not the automatic rifle. Grandfathers of the tribe, remembering the slaughter before the

white man came to protect them, do
not regret the change.

CHAPTER 14

AFRICAN PARADISE

JUST BEFORE the outbreak of the Second Great War I found a corner of tropical Africa which I resolved to visit again one day. All the time I was there I knew that the sense of freedom, the pleasure of living along that beautiful and remote river, was too fine to last. War was in the air. "Make the most of these days," I told myself. "It will be a long time before you will see this paradise again."

My old German map of South-West Africa had shown me this distant river frontier. It was the Okavango, way up in the northeastern corner of the territory, far beyond the last farms; and it promised sanctuary from a mad world. "This dry season – the Okavango," I said to my friends.

The plan was carried out. Rifles and three hundred cartridges, water in tins for the desert crossing, coarse tobacco for the Bushmen, food and cigarettes for weeks were packed away. To reach the Okavango we travelled along a weird highway, running for four hundred miles from the heart of South-West Africa to the river. It is the Omuramba Omatako, a river that has been extinct for a thousand years and more. Every dry river bed in the country is an "omuramba" to the Hereros, but this is the greatest "omuramba" of them all. The beginning may be traced near the twin peaks of Omotako ("the buttocks"), those green-clad giants rearing sharply up to two thousand feet above the plains to the north of Windhoek.

North eastward goes the Omuramba Omatako, a depression that must be

striking indeed when seen from the air, with high trees along the fringes of the whole length of it. When the explorer, C. J. Andersson, first opened the trail with his ox-wagons, he thought that he was following a dry tributary towards the unknown Kunene river, far away in the east. His men hacked a path through the bush with axes. Today, motor-cars drive up the "omuramba"; but I cannot say they pass with ease.

The bush is still there, lashing at the sides of the car, scoring deep into the paint. Beneath the hot tyres are the same deep, sandy tracks that held back Andersson's wagons. In the forests are the same wild beasts. A leopard smelt round us one night while we slept, leaving the small marks of its spoor within a few yards of the camp. And there are the same appalling stretches of "thirst," mile after mile where the

ancient river is choked with sand and even a Bushman can find no moisture.

Such was our route, the old road of the elephant hunters, the traders, the men who wandered beyond the law – a road of romance still. I came to the great "omuramba" by way of Nuragas, the most remote police station in South-West Africa, 60 miles from the village of Grootfontein. There I found Lance-Sergeant Sieberhagen in charge, just recovered from dangerous wounds caused by poisoned arrows. The talk in these far outposts is mainly of Bushman patrols. Year after year, as I hear more of the Bushmen and see more of the Bushmen themselves, I often wonder whether the little people of the bush are not the most fascinating of all human beings.

Sieberhagen's police trackers were all Bushmen, and queer they looked in

cast-off uniforms. One of them saved the paralysed sergeant's life by sucking the arrow-poison out of the wound. For a shilling a day a Bushman tracker renders services that no other man could perform. "Faint tracks in the sand tell a Bushman a whole story," declared Sergeant Sieberhagen. Often they will name the very man who has left a footprint – it is as good as a signature."

Bushman patrols are carried out on camels. I asked the sergeant how he ever managed to catch the elusive bands of Bushmen who raid the cattle on outlying farms and sometimes shoot poisoned arrows at policemen. "We don't always make arrests," he admitted. "The fellow who nearly killed me is still free. But one day he will return to his own area, and then the trackers will find him. You see, all

these little clans of Bushmen have their own boundaries, and they stick to them. If a Bushman wants to travel he can pass through another clan's country as long as he does not hunt or gather honey. He can drink at the water-holes; but if he digs up water hidden in ostrich egg-shells, he faces the death penalty according to Bushman law."

It sounds primitive, but there is sheer necessity behind the rules that the Bushmen have made for themselves. Life in the bush is never easy.

The white flagstaff and the station buildings on the dune at Nuragas vanished in dense bush, and I drove on to meet the course of the Omuramba Omatako at Kano Vlei. The great, extinct river bed is marked by kameeldoorn and acacia trees. It is a route of ruts and holes, ant heaps and

high yellow grass, with the sand track so faint that it is often difficult to follow at night.

Okavango labourers, marching home after working for a year or two for the white man in the south, have left rough huts all along the trail. Often you see groups of these natives sharing their heavy loads with the aid of poles. Pack-donkeys cost only ten shillings apiece, but donkeys make wonderful lion-bait. So the men prefer to tramp back for hundreds of miles, each one with a burden weighing up to eighty pounds. And every load must include water for stretches where the "omuramba" yields no water for thirty miles or more.

Kano Vlei is a fine water-hole, a favourite meeting place for the Kung Bushmen. At times you may find three hundred gathered there. They are quiet

now, all behaving well. In the past they delighted in sniping and robbing the homeward-bound natives. The police will be after them if they relapse into their old ways.

In camp beyond Kano Vlei I met a white man who knows the Omuramba Omatako as intimately as a bus-driver knows his daily route. He drove up in the night with a motor-truck loaded with stores and returning labourers. His face was shaped and hardened by years in the bush. Kemp is his name. I had heard of him, and in the firelight I led him to describe his years of work and danger, loneliness and fever in the "omuramba." One of the old South African Mounted Riflemen was Kemp, and after the 1914-15 campaign in South-West Africa he re-joined the police and served for nearly ten years in the territory. During that period he

rode out after many Bushmen wrongdoers. One was a murderer, and the tracks led into the “omuramba” not far from the spot where he told me the story. Kemp and his two native constables left their camels at a water-hole and plodded along in the moonlight towards the fire in the “werft” of bush shelters where the murderer and his family lived.

“One of the native constables had a rifle, and I gave the other constable my own rifle,” narrated Kemp. “I carried a camel sjambok on my wrist, but I wanted my hands free to clip on the handcuffs. As we crept up to the Bushman “werft” I was surprised to hear one of the constables shout a warning. Later I discovered that he was related to the murderer’s sister. At that moment both native constables

ran away with the rifles, and I was left to face the murderer unarmed.

“The murderer charged me with an assegai, stabbed until my uniform jacket was in shreds, wounded me in the arm and struck me over the head. Then the sharp point of the assegai broke off and I was able to knock him down and sit on him. While I handcuffed him the Bushmen women struck at me with pieces of burning wood until my back was scorched. I shouted for help, and at last one native constable returned. Then I fainted, for I had lost a great deal of blood. That night I rode fifteen miles to the next water-hole with the constable and the prisoner. I was too weak to go further, so for three days we rested. Then, still suffering from the stab and the burns, I covered the remaining 75 miles to

Nuragas. I finished the journey to the Grootfontein hospital in a mule-cart.”

Kemp left the police in 1925 and farmed near Nuragas. But the Bushmen, too lazy to hunt, raided his cattle again and again. In 1928 he joined the Northern Labour Organisation and built a house and rationing depot at a wild spot called Karakuvisa. His wife and family went with him. I saw the mud-walled house during my journey up the Omuramba Omatako. A more lonely residence it would be difficult to find, even in South-West Africa. There lions killed his donkeys and a lone “rogue” elephant damaged the mealies he had planted. There, too, while at work on the roof of his house without a hat, Kemp went down for the first time with sunstroke.

But the most tragic experience of all was the great malaria outbreak of

1934, when thousands of Bushmen died and Kemp lost one of his children. “The Bushmen used fire as a medicine and danced madly to drive the malaria devils away,” said Kemp. “It was a season of heavy rain, impossible to get through to Grootfontein – and no doctor for hundreds of miles.”

Once, when a back-axle broke, Kemp had to walk for eighty miles along the “omuramba.” He has known intense thirst, too, and twice he has saved his life by shooting gemsbok and drinking the milk. There can be few perils of the wilderness he has not faced, and nothing dismays him now. Omuramba Omatako lured adventurous men in the German days. My old German map shows a spot called Blockfontein, forty miles from the Okavango river. As far back as 1908, when much of the

territory was unexplored and unknown, two German farmers pushed on beyond the last civilised outposts and settled at Blockfontein. I saw the ruins of their enterprise. This was indeed the limit of colonisation in South-West Africa – a journey of weeks by ox-wagon. Yet the partners built a comfortable home on the dune above the “omuramba.” Cotton, their first crop, suffered from the frost. (In winter the night temperature of the “omuramba” is often below freezing point. Their wheat did not flourish. Inevitably the Bushmen stole their cattle. But I fancy the two lonely Germans were satisfied with the hunting and the ivory. They entertained other hunters at Blockfontein. Cheerful evenings were spent round the tiled stove while hyenas and jackals howled outside. In 1911 the

farmers trekked away. Bushmen wrecked the house, pulling down the brick walls and taking all the wood and metal to make arrows. Today even the corrugated iron roof has gone, and Blockfontein is hardly more than an obsolete name on the map.

Omuramba Omatako has seen ghastly events. Years ago, even before the Blockfontein venture, a German farmer named Paasch took his twelve-year-old daughter on a journey up the “omuramba” to the Okavango. Paasch was murdered by a chief. The girl, escaping with a loyal servant, was captured by Bushmen at Karakuvisa and burnt alive. When the news of the outrage reached Grootfontein, ten bold young farmers formed an avenging commando. They rode up to Karakuvisa, captured the Bushman leader, and held a court under the tree of the

burning. There the sentence was carried out by a firing squad.

A weird place, the “omuramba.” All the wild animals of the territory have been observed in the bush from time to time – even a herd of elephants fifty strong. Strangest of all the animals seen there is the “munu.” It is impossible to explain the “munu” as a mere native legend; for rare though it is, white men have seen the thing and their descriptions tally. Here is the “munu” as it was described to me;

“The face was black, the ears pointed, the hair long and yellow. It went shambling across the ‘omuramba’ like a man. The height was about two feet six inches, and it looked more like a bear than a baboon.” Naturalists are inclined to identify the “munu” as a “tree baboon,” one species of which is found in the Okavango region. The

natives have all heard of the “munu” from their fathers but few have seen it. They say that the “munu” steals mealies, carrying them under the arm like a baboon; and that the “munu” will attack women. An intelligent Kuangari boy named Phineas, who travelled with me as guide, gave a convincing description of the “munu” and assured me that he had seen one. “Do you want to see it again?” I asked him.

“No, master. It is an angry animal, and I am afraid of it.” The “munu” remains a mystery of the Omuramba Omatako. It is a mysterious highway, this long route slashed across the brown face of Africa from the twin peaks to the river. But I have happy memories of the camps between the sandy banks. One daybreak in the “omuramba” a man who has spent his life in the wilds

shook off his sleeping bag and turned to me:

“Hear the pheasants calling?” he said.
“That’s the sound that draws a man back to the bush.”

As we approached the river I saw naked men, carrying spears, dash into hiding. After a year in the city this was most satisfying. It occurred only in a few places, however, and gifts of tobacco soon convinced the nervous tribesmen that we had not come to eat them. You smile at my exaggeration perhaps? Let me quote from an official report on the Okavango native reserve: “In July (1934) the Administrator visited Kuring Kuru and all the stations along the river to Andara and held meetings with the natives, being accompanied by Mr. Eedes, the native affairs officer. He was well received,

although considerable excitement was caused by rumours that his object was to castrate all the males and burn the children. This story rose apparently from the fact that piles of firewood had been collected at the spots along the river where his camp was to be pitched, and illustrates the mentality of the natives in this area.”

Mr. Harold Eedes, the assistant native commissioner in charge of the reserve, soon became more to me than a name in an official report. I saw his lion-scarred back and arms when he washed in the mornings. Hundreds of miles along the Okavango we travelled together – the happiest camps, the most fascinating trail I have ever known. Much though he may dislike it, I am compelled to say more about the hospitable Harold Eedes of the Okavango.

Eedes was a boy of fifteen at school in Cape Town when the First Great War broke out, I imagine he must have been sturdily built then, for they took him into the army, and he rode into South-West Africa with the conquering troops under General Botha. He is a fair-haired, clean-shaven giant today, looking ten years less than his age; a memorable personality, a man of many escapes, the ideal frontier ruler.

For years Eedes was stationed in Ovamboland. He has lived in extreme isolation ever since he was a schoolboy-soldier, and for him the wilderness holds no terrors. Once he was sent out on camel-back to explore the unsurveyed northern boundary of South-West Africa. He pushed too far, without knowledge of the water-holes.

There was no water. The last water-bottle was emptied.

“Then, when I was exhausted, I lay down under a bush to die,” Eedes told me. “The torture of thirst was bad ... the anguish of the mind was worse. As I lay there with my eyes blurred I saw a wild pig and reached for my rifle. ‘Hello, that’s queer ... a pig with a stick in his mouth,’ I said to myself, aiming the rifle. I watched the pig before squeezing the trigger. My eyes cleared, and I saw that the stick was the pig’s tusks. As I stared, the pig rooted in the undergrowth and revealed a water-hole. Then I fired. There was a little muddy water in the hole, and a gallon of water in the pig. I got to my camel and rode back to life.”

Eedes first took charge of the Okavango area in 1933, and he is still there. He and Mrs Eedes went to live

in one of the houses at Kuring Kuru built by the Germans as a police post in 1911. I walked round the ruins with him, and sensed the weird atmosphere of this lonely station beside the river.

“You’re right – it was a place of sudden death,” remarked Eedes. “Malaria, suicide, mystery – this little graveyard covers the old tragedies. The first missionary who lived at Kuring Kuru walked out into the bush and they never found his body.

The Germans had made bricks from ant heaps. They had left a huge mound of bottles and an avenue of kameeldorn trees as signs of their occupation. Loop-holes in the walls of the police station remain as evidence of the isolation of Kuring Kuru in their day. They were nearly 200 miles from Tsumeb, the copper mining settlement. Sand for more than a hundred miles

and no motor-cars. The loop-holes fitted the scene.

In 1936 Eedes moved his headquarters from Kuring Kuru to the more convenient site at Runt, “the high place on the sand dune,” almost in the centre of his territory. Long afterwards he discovered a German file, dated 1906, in which Runtu was described as the most suitable place on the river for an official station. A German doctor had visited Runtu, but his advice had evidently been overlooked. In the solid limestone home of Mr. and Mrs Eedes at Runtu one forgets the distance to railhead; especially at the sundown hour, with the radio playing, and the grandeur of the Angola scene framed by the netted veranda. From their green wicker chairs, Mr. and Mrs Eedes have seen lions and zebras, tssebe and elephant, a majestic natural

pageant on the Angola plains across the river.

Strawberries, pawpaw's, lemons, oranges, a terrace of granadillas and many vegetables are growing in the garden at Runtu. It seems incredible that the sand-dune on the edge of the tropical forest should have been so rapidly transformed, and with such charm. On the frontier, however, it is wise to live on the food provided by the land. Roast kudu must appear more often than lamb. In October every year before the rains cut off communication with the south, Mrs Eedes orders groceries for six months. Six months of steamy heat and slashing torrents – that is a phase of life on the Okavango which cannot be ignored. The African paradise I saw was the blue, dry winter of the river territory, and I am fully aware of the devastating change that

shuts down over the land with merciless grip when the winter ends.

Eedes once bought 5,000 cigarettes as his stock for the rainy season. He presented his personal “boy” with a hundred cigarettes. Five months later, at a period when fresh supplies could not be secured, he smoked his last cigarettes. The thoughtful servant then returned to his master the hundred cigarettes, earning something more than gratitude for his providence.

In the rainy season transport along the river and down to railhead almost ceases. Eedes covers 10,000 miles a year with his motor-lorry; but he drives away from Runtu in the summer only to deal with emergencies. The tax-collecting tours, cattle-branding excursions and other inspections up and down the 283 miles of river – these duties must be done in

winter. Then he sleeps under the sky through freezing midnights more often than in his home. I have a pleasant picture in my mind of the native commissioner on tour.

The motor-lorry, with its cheerful band of natives on top, halts in a clearing on the river bank. Looper, the tall interpreter, climbs off and takes charge of the unloading. Jonas, the small, bucktoothed cook, receives the chop-boxes and pots. An enormous log is set alight. Mercy, the mechanic, and Phineas, the police messenger, are busy with the tent which Eedes uses in the winter only to cover his large tin bath. A wooden table with iron trestles, camp chairs, lanterns, bedding and stretchers are set out beneath the great baobab tree. Sticks are cut for the inevitable mosquito nets. Rifles and shotguns are stacked against the

tree. The local chief calls with upraised hand to pay his respects, and is rewarded with a mug of salt. One of the servants, complaining of fever, receives quinine. Milk and eggs arrive.

Then, for an hour while light remains, Eedes takes his rod, stands in a dug-out canoe in midstream casting expertly, reeling in many a tiger fish and bream. Fresh fish, roast guinea-fowl with bacon, rice and potatoes, canned fruit salad – such is our dinner on the banks of the Okavango. The lion trap is set, for Eedes is “protector of the natives” and human beings and cattle must be saved from cruel claws. Distant drums sound the lullaby of Africa. The camp is at rest.

Not all the tours are so comfortable. Eedes set out once with six camels to survey a direct route across the unmapped wilderness between Runtu

and railhead at Grootfontein. Four camels survived the grim journey. Eedes travelled by sun and compass, forcing a path over nearly fifty bush-covered sand-dunes. The camels found their own way home like racing pigeons. If a new route is officially approved, Eedes appears once again as a road maker. (A native commissioner has to study more than native customs.) He will assemble a "safari" of fifty natives and proceed along the route cutting away the bush at a rate of ten miles a day. Tree stumps will be removed, ant-bear holes filled in. The traffic must do the rest, and the first journeys will be adventurous rather than swift. You must be a resourceful driver if you hope to tackle the tracks of the Okavango, old or new, in safety.

Fortunately the white men of the river are all almost as tough as Eedes

himself. I refer to the missionaries, the Finns and the German Roman Catholics, spread out at short intervals all the way from Kuring Kuru to Andara. A greater contrast in missions and missionaries it would be hard to find. The Finns, with their Arctic fairness of hair and complexion and severe clothes, seem a long way from Helsingfors amid the Okavango palms. Yet a nursing sister told me that the winter Okavango climate was colder than the Finland she had just left.

Several of the unadorned, mat-walled Finnish churches stand open to the sky. The mission buildings lack the solid finish, the air of permanence which the Roman Catholics have achieved. These puritanical Finns, simple and kindly people, have not the same skill in carpentry or the art of creating marvellous gardens in the

wilds. They are not there for life. Steam baths of the type used in Finland are their only luxury.

Most travellers, I think, would wish to see all the missionaries taking a more practical interest in the health of their converts. It is done elsewhere in Africa. Yet there is not a qualified medical missionary along the length of the Okavango. The medicines supplied free by the government often lie unopened while diseases ravage the kraals.

At the time of my visit there was a young German doctor at a Roman Catholic mission. He had been there with his wife, formerly an operatic singer, for three years; and they were on the point of returning to Germany. Their children were the first white babies to be born on the Okavango. When I called, they opened their last

bottle of wine. The piano, all the furniture, had been packed for the journey. They were giving away their cats and trying to find a home for a huge and ferocious pet crane. I heard angry bird noises and barking outside the window, and saw the crane rising like a helicopter after pecking a dog.

The excitement of this young couple at the prospect of seeing the outside world again was almost pitiable. This remote corner of Africa must have been a keen disappointment to them. They revealed their feelings with a few English words they knew. The doctor regretted leaving his leprosy research. "But Wurzburg ... my home ... ah, it will be better in Wurzburg." Malaria, or the treatment, had given them all a yellowish pallor. "No malaria in Wurzburg," said the doctor.

His long canoe journeys were over but there was no doctor on the Okavango.

Among the Roman Catholic priests was a man I admired at the first meeting – white-bearded, leather-faced Father Bierfert of Nyangana, a pioneer missionary of 1910, hunter, author and benevolent host.

“Here everything is Okavango,” announced Father Bierfert, indicating a tempting table. “Okavango beer, Okavango sausage, Okavango bread, Okavango oranges.” As we ate, Father Bierfert recalled his first ox-wagon trek to the river, when there were no other white men on the frontier. Once a year the mails arrived, and then the priests ceased work for three days and read their letters. They have built a beautiful, self-supporting mission. I shall always remember the Angelus sounding through the orange grove,

ringing on down the river ... from Nyangana.

“So peaceful.” Father Bierfert laughed. “One time the German Government heard a false rumour that we had all been massacred. Soldiers came here, with machine-guns. But this Okavango is wholesome. It is not dangerous land. For the lungs it is magnificent. Only the malaria.

The talk turned to lions, unwholesome raiders that spared neither kraal nor mission. “One dark night when the heavens were full of water the lions came here,” recalled Father Bierfert. “In one night they took horses, donkeys, sixty cows and calves. Prides of lions, five to ten in a pride.” That was the time when Father Bierfert stood on guard with his rifle at the entrance to the cattle enclosure. He heard a sudden roaring behind him,

and turned to see a lion jumping clear over the wall with a donkey in its mouth. The missionaries shot and poisoned with strychnine twenty-five lions at Nyangana that year.

A glass of Okavango beer with you, Father Bierfert! Many a glass and coffee cup I raised at those far-away Okavango missions. I salute you all, Fathers, Brothers, the Sisters of the Order who never return to civilisation, and the Finns.

Now I am going out with Eedes to study the natives of the river and hear more of the ways of the unfathomable African. The truck is ready, Looper with his sombrero hat dominates the load. We are to travel from the land of the proud Kwangari down to the rapids where dwell the jet-black Mbukushu.

“Morro!” That is the Okavango native’s greeting to the white man – a ringing welcome given with upraised arm and the utmost goodwill.

“Morro!” Men run from the stockaded kraals to watch the passing car. Women rise like polished ebony statues from the work in the corn patches. Even the young children join in the happy cry.

“Morro!” It is dusk, and next day we are to cross the river and shoot in Angola. Blind, old and alone, a man with hair like grey cotton-wool feels his way into camp to give the Okavango salute. “Morro, old man – come back next sunset and you shall have meat.”

“Morro!” A tribute to wise government, in a land where the presence of the white man has brought

nothing but good. This great, unknown reserve of nearly ten million acres is certainly not over-populated – about 18,000 natives of five tribes live along the river, and possibly 5,000 Bushmen in the trackless sand forest. We are in the Kuangari area, most northerly of the tribes, and the land of the Chieftainess Kanuni. A film director seeking glamour would not care much for this potentate. Wrinkled and shapeless at 35, she carries a baby slung on her back. Heavy copper anklets suggest her wealth; and indeed she possesses many cattle. Kanuni can well afford the ox she has presented to the government medical officer who is visiting her tribe. I hope she is pleased with the tiger fish, caught that morning by the doctor and given in return.

Kanuni's nephew, the future ruler of 6,000 people (if he shows more

sobriety), is the most remarkable figure at the indaba. Someone has given him an ancient frock coat. It has a green tinge now, contrasting with the yellow sand where the owner squats listening to the words of Eedes and wondering how to get rid of his headache.

The interpreter, speaking with emphasis despite the absence of front teeth, is repeating the doctor's warning about lepers. "Aie!" echoes the gathering. Yet they will return to their kraals and eat with the lepers, from the same cooking pots.

Nevertheless, these Kuangaris are the most intelligent people of the river. They have been cultivating land longer, they work harder than the Bunja, the Sambio, the Diriko or the sluggish Mbukushu. All the tribes are related to the powerful Ovambo in the

west; but when they broke away from the migration and settled beside the generous river, they lived too easily and lost character. There may be differences in speech between the tribes, but only a native could detect them. The polygamous Kuangaris, with their tufted foreheads and shell-decked women, closely resemble the other river folk. In winter most of them live near the river; but when the bordering plains are flooded in summer they move inland to duplicate villages of mat huts and palisades.

“Witchcraft must cease,” Eedes informed the chiefs when he arrived in the territory. Unfortunately a witchdoctor has only to cross the river and he is safe in Angola; and similarly the evil priests of witchcraft in the Angola forests are often able to slip into South-West Africa to display their

black magic. The warning, however, has put an end to “rain-making” by means of human sacrifices – a common event before the Union Flag was raised on the river. On the far side, in Angola, babies are still claimed as the witchdoctor’s victims.

The “rain-maker” is a genuinely mysterious figure along the Okavango. His position is hereditary, and he guards secrets unknown to white science – for example, the method of his murders. Usually he chooses an island as his sinister home; and his own children, or those of relatives, are selected for sacrifice. When the land is parched, but dark clouds promise rain, a child is laid out under a tree and the black, ancient ceremony begins. The “rainmaker” holds a vine from the tree over the living body of the child. Suddenly he tears the vine away from

the tree, and in that moment the fascinated onlookers see that the child is dead. There are no wounds.

Under the Union flag, as I have said, this atrocity has vanished. The tribal “rain-maker” can do no more than slaughter a black cow.

The natives are learning that certain forms of witchcraft will surely be punished. Not long ago Eedes was puzzled when a well behaved chief ordered three giraffes to be killed. Giraffes rank as Royal game, as the chief well knew. At last the truth emerged. The sickly chief, having failed to benefit from the white man’s medicine, had called in the services of a celebrated witchdoctor. This “mganga” from Angola had “thrown the bones” and advised the chief that parts of the giraffes would be required for the prescription. The chief was

fined, his hunters put in gaol, the witchdoctor took refuge, muttering curses, in darkest Angola; while the most comprehensive “black magic” outfit I have ever seen came into the possession of Mr. Eedes.

Antelope horns for storing potions and “cupping” patients were there, with bundles of herbs in snakeskins, calabashes and tortoise-shells, cowrie-shells, dried beetles, talons of birds of prey, river mussels and seeds. Most fascinating were the witchdoctor’s miniatures, used in divining – tin canoes, knobkieries, carved monkeys, grim symbols with which any diabolical idea could be expressed and supported. Such a miscellany must have meant years of collection, and his practice will surely suffer.

Okavango healers and herbalists are suspect, for most of them carry on

witchcraft as a profitable sideline. Their favourite remedy – the blood of a freshly-killed fowl taken as medicine – lacks scientific support. The specialist in poisons, who mixes the drinks for trials by ordeal, is another dignitary whose job can no longer be regarded as safe.

The tribesmen are encouraged to possess firearms, and more than 750 flintlocks and other weird and obsolete weapons have been registered. (This is the reverse of the policy in Ovamboland, where guns are exchanged for corn in time of famine.) The Okavango is peaceful; eland, wildebeest and other animals may be shot by the natives for the pot. Moreover, lions and leopards are still plentiful, and Eedes considers it right that the natives should be allowed to protect their cattle. So the government

sells percussion caps and gunpowder in small quantities. A native never wastes a shot.

Meat is really a luxury among the fish-eating, milk-drinking tribes of the river. Word reached Eedes one day that a dead elephant had been found in the river. He hurried to the spot, six miles from headquarters, to examine the carcass for bullet marks – evidence of poaching – but failed to discover the cause of death.

The elephant was towed to the bank by a fleet of, canoes, and hauled out of the water by 36 oxen. Tusks weighing 170 lb. were cut out. Next day the whole bloated carcass had vanished. Meat hungry natives had left only the bones. The Okavango lies in the elephant belt, and there are probably 500 in the area. Many swim the river from Angola, but like the giraffe they

are strictly protected. I often found the diamond pattern of fresh elephant tracks near the river.

Millet and mealies are grown, but the natives do not store their grain in mud-sealed baskets as do the thrifty Ovambos. They live only for the day, and if Eedes had not forbidden the cutting of wild fruit trees they would have robbed themselves steadily of both shade and fruit. As it is, the high ivory nut palm and many varieties of the marula tree flourish along the river.

Here are the drinks of the Okavango. "Shikundu," made from millet meal and water, is the main non-intoxicating beverage. Fermented corn, mushimba fruit, wild honey and water and palm sap can be relied upon to give life to a dance. Then there is the famous wine made when the

marula fruit is cut open and allowed to flow into fermenting pots. During the marula season, native custom has for centuries forbidden the carrying of knives, assegais, or knobkierries. If there is a fight at a drinking party and a man is wounded or killed, the owner of the weapon is punished – not the assailant.

Such is one of the laws which Mr. Eedes upholds. His rule is indirect, for he sits in court at Runtu as adviser to the chiefs who administer justice. Even a murder, when it is unpremeditated, may be dealt with by the chiefs in the reserve. There is no gaol. A native sentenced to imprisonment by a chief simply lives in a kraal near Runtu and arrives at work unfailingly every morning. Tax defaulters make roads.

One day at Kuring Kuru I took an interpreter with me and walked into one of the circular kraals. Outside everything was a thorn bush fence. The sharpened poles of the palisade were ten feet high, and the inner walls were formed by reed mats. Small, overcrowded sleeping huts were thatched with grass. Reed mats, however, play a large part in Okavango life. Made by the men, they serve as bedding and building material and many other purposes.

The men have few duties. Apart from herding stock, repairing the kraals, and tanning skins for clothing, they are an idle crowd. I was told that they were too lazy even to collect the wild oranges and manketi nuts, the plums, roots and bulbs that grow in the veld. Instead, each family has a long-standing arrangement with a Bushman

family. The Bushmen bring in this food, and thus earn the right to take part in the harvesting.

The Okavango woman, on the other hand, cooks the “eshima” porridge, fetches water and wood, makes baskets, stamps the grain, plants, reaps and gathers the crops. When the river is low in October a line of women may be seen in shallow places scooping out fish with funnel-shaped baskets. Hooks and nets are used at other times, but not often. That calls for more energy than the native possesses.

News travels along the Okavango mainly by the human voice. The men have developed a knack of making their voices carry. It is almost as clever as drum signalling, if less mysterious. Gossip is shouted down 200 miles of river as fast as heliographs could relay a message.

Drums are used, too, but mainly for other purposes. At one camp the “tom-tom-tom” came thudding across the river all day and throughout the night to hasten the recovery of a sick woman in the kraal. Eedes has forbidden night drumming near Runtu. One can hear too much of the most typical sound of Africa.

The tribes live on both sides of the river, but for every family on the Angola bank you will find ten families in South-West African territory. They lose their cattle when they cross, for otherwise lung sickness would spread. But the immigration continues. I thought the Angola people looked more like savages. Even a shirt was a rarity among the men who tracked for me in the bush at Bunja.

What hunters they were, those wild and naked Bunja men with their long

spears and their bows! They knew exactly how to approach the lechwe herds so that I might shoot accurately. They were tireless, setting a fast pace as the buck circled on the plain, tracking swiftly in the thorn bush. I saw three men carry a reedbuck weighing about 140 lb. for miles to the canoes, and seldom did they rest.

Great days, wonderful times! The lumbering lechwe raising their fine horns from the grass, then speeding away. The “spangzoom” of bullets, and the definite thud of a hit. The long pursuit of an unseen herd, a speck of blood on a leaf, a glimpse and a finishing shot. But I was glad to hand my rifle to a carrier when the march back to the river began. How good a cup of tea can taste after a day’s shooting under the sun!

“Morro!” I must rest in a Mbukushu canoe again one day, gazing first into the clear waters, then to the sky when tropic birds dart from the reeds.

“Morro!” to all you lazy people of the river. Perhaps you do not deserve the African paradise where you dwell, the land which might yield so much more. But I like your greeting, and your farewell. “Morro!”

Fishing in the rivers of tropical Africa can be as exciting as hunting in the bush. I refer, of course, to that voracious and dashing fighter, the tiger fish. Size for size, the tiger fish puts up a more determined struggle for liberty than any other fish of inland waters or the wide oceans of the world. This is not only my opinion. It is confirmed by many naturalists and

sportsmen who have played the savage tiger fish in African lakes and rivers.

I camped at a place of happy memories called Kapako, on the Okavango river. My guide in the difficult art of tiger fishing was Harold Eedes. The camp under the huge kameeldorn tree was high above the river, with a panorama of Angola on the far side – herds of lechwe, reed-buck, guinea-fowl foraging on an island in the foreground, dug-out canoes on the clear waters.

“This was Ngombi’s camp,” remarked Eedes one day. Ngombi means “the ox,” and I learnt that it was the nickname given by the natives to a wealthy, middle-aged Englishman who came to the Okavango, year after year, for the tiger fishing. Ngombi could have gone to New Zealand or Florida or California for his sport; but



The end of the day's hunting – an Okavango scene.

he liked the Okavango so well, the climate suited his asthma, and he settled down there every winter for months, fascinated by the tiger fish. During the rest of the year he lived on board an old steam whaler (converted into a houseboat) moored at Walvis Bay. His hospitality is remembered, though he departed for the Seychelles, leaving the whaler scuttled by order of the harbour authorities. He had a garden on board, where he grew his own vegetables and kept fowls. But for four years his great aim in life was to land more and heavier tiger fish.

So here we were at Ngombi's old camp at Kapako. "The chief built him a house of reed mats – dining-room, bedroom, bath-room," Eedes told me. "He hung his meat from that tree, and lions used to nibble it at night. But he

never bothered to get up and shoot them – he was after tiger fish!"

Ngombi caught more than 300 tiger fish during six annual visits to the Okavango, the largest weighing 131 lb. Colonel Stevenson-Hamilton, one of the most reliable of South African naturalists, mentions tiger fish of 30 lb. or more in the Zambezi; but Eedes believes 20 lb. to be the Okavango maximum, with an average of 5 lb. So little fishing has been done by white men in the Okavango, however, that there may be surprises for the enterprising angler.

The Okavango tiger fish (*hydrocyon vittatus*) is a spectacular fish, blue-grey in colour with horizontal black stripes running from gills to orange-red tail. Needle-sharp teeth project from the hard and bony jaws. You have only to glance at them to see why

special gear is used – two-inch spoon and steel wire trace. If the reel jams, the top of your rod may go. A twelve-foot trout rod provides the finest sport, for then a 5 lb. tiger fish will often take a vigorous twenty minutes to land.

Flies are useless, but raw meat or fish may be tried on the tail hook at times when the gorged tiger fish refuses to leap at the spoon. Treble hooks are necessary owing to the hardness of the mouth. Usually the fish takes the spoon with such desperate haste that the hooks lodge firmly in the gills. Then you have him – if nothing breaks. Wastage is serious, however, and the ill-equipped fisherman on the Okavango will have to travel many hundreds of miles to renew his supplies.

The hooked tiger fish dashes off magnificently, jumping clear of the water again and again, seldom resting or sulking. The angler's greatest problem is to select a position from which to play the fish successfully. There are few places along the reed-fringed banks of the Okavango from which casting is really satisfactory. "Ngombi" possessed a steel boat with outboard-motor; but the cost of transporting a boat overland across the desert to the river would be prohibitive for most men. Eedes uses the native dug-out canoes. The newcomer will observe his skill with astonishment, for the canoes are so narrow that they appear to be capsizing with the slightest movement. If you do turn a canoe over, you are in deadly peril, for the watchful crocodiles are always waiting unseen. Nevertheless, I never

saw a canoe capsized on the Okavango, and after a few days I was able to stand up and feel moderately secure. The native paddlers do most of the balancing, and with two experienced paddlers on board a canoe is fool-proof, (if not lunatic-proof). By the way, only a lunatic will resort to wading in pursuit of tiger fish. I repeat my crocodile warning. Even on the sandbanks it is possible to become so absorbed in fishing that a particularly bold crocodile may creep up unobserved and flick its sinister tail!

Trolling from a canoe with about twenty-five yards of line out is probably the safest method for then you can sit down to it. There are rocky places near the rapids where your paddlers are able to sit on a rock and hold the canoe steady while you cast into a likely pool.

Tiger fish start biting soon after sunrise until about 10 a.m., and again from 4 p.m. to sunset. They lurk in the deep pools, ready to seize any creature smaller than themselves, including tiny crocodiles. I have found no evidence supporting the story that tiger fish attack human beings, though they are closely related to a South American river fish which has this habit.

Scientists first examined the tiger fish in 1775, when a Nile specimen reached Europe and Forskal described it. There are six species in Africa, and the Okavango tiger fish was first collected in Lake Ngami in 1860 by an assistant to Castelnau, a French naturalist living in Cape Town. In Egypt this greedy fish is called "the dog of the water," while the Congo natives know it as the "water leopard."

Congo specimens grow to a length of 39 inches.

Thousands of tiger fish died in the Okavango one year within living memory. No white officials were stationed on the river at that time, however, and the cause was not discovered. Tiger fish form an important item in the diet of the riverside tribes. Basket traps are used, and a poison made from a powdered bulb is often sprinkled in backwaters with fair results. Constant fishing by natives has not thinned out the tiger fish.

White people do not eat tiger fish, but I found the Okavango bream a more tempting dish. As game fish, however, there is no comparison between the two. The tiger fish remains the king of Africa's own fish.

When I have bought a new rifle I shall go crocodile hunting again. The old three-o-three bullets hit and bounced off. Probably I never found the right spot. But next time – a high velocity rifle with telescopic sight.

Day after day along the Okavango river I tried to kill and recover a crocodile. I shot from canoes, waited on sandbanks, stalked through reeds, fires at crocodiles resting in the sun and fired again desperately at eyes protruding from the water. Men earn a living at this game, but the new rifle will not put me in their class. I still have to secure my first crocodile.

As a sport, crocodile shooting has not received enough attention. I had a permit to cross into Angola and shoot game large and small; and I went often enough with my friends and walked

many miles and brought back a number of fine antelope. Yet the hours I spent by the clear river waiting for crocodile linger in my memory. Sometimes it is a weird experience. The tracks of the crocodiles are all about you, very much like large human footprints. You can see the tunnels they make in the reeds; the dark lairs where you can imagine them dragging their prey. A twig drops on your sun-helmet, and you jump. Better look all round, through the bushes, and make sure that no crocodile is stalking you unobserved.

The Okavango native (like all Africans) is a fatalist about the crocodile menace. "Only once have I known a native to plan revenge," Eedes told me. "He was the father of a child taken by a crocodile, and he built narrow passages with stakes and pits,

trapping several killers. But as a rule the natives leave the crocodiles alone. They will eat crocodiles only in famine times."

It seems impossible to exterminate the crocodile. I saw dynamite used without success in backwaters of the Okavango. Eedes has a scheme for pulling a decoy rubber dog across the river. It will be loaded with dynamite, which will be detonated by the crocodile's jaws! Dogs are seized every day along the Okavango.

The natives never give their dogs water in the kraals; and when the thirsty dogs go to the river to drink they are pulled in. The places where the native footpaths end on the river bank are all well known to the crocodiles. Many human beings, mainly women and children, have been taken there. These tragedies are

repeated along every tropical African river.

Father Bierfert of Nyangana has lost many of his people in the jaws of crocodiles. Just after his arrival in 1910 to found the mission, a mother and her baby were taken. This made a deep impression on the priest. He became an active enemy of the crocodiles, and he has made many attempts to tackle the menace. Once he placed meat poisoned with strychnine on a small reed raft, and later found seven dead crocodiles. When poison is used, however, warning must be sent to the kraals up and down the river, or the flesh of the dead crocodiles may be eaten.

One of the Nyangana mission brothers shot a crocodile and counted sixty eggs inside. He gave them to a native, who ate the lot. The brother also

discovered a nest with ninety-three eggs on an island.

Father Bierfert tells all his people to fight if they are seized by crocodiles. "The crocodile is a coward," he declares: "Keep your wits about you and make him let go!" And the bearded old father is right, too. One woman followed the advice and hit the toes of a crocodile that was hauling her into the water. She escaped, and lived. Another woman hit a crocodile repeatedly with a calabash and was released. But the great majority of victims become so terror-stricken that they are dragged down easily.

I met a trader, fond of swimming, who had made a crocodile proof enclosure in a backwater of the river near his store. Unless you are protected by stakes, it is madness to enter deep water. Once, at the Popa rapids, I



A promising spot for crocodiles. The author waiting for a shot below the Popa rapids, Okavango river, South-West Africa

splashed about in clear shallow water, but even that short plunge gave me an uncomfortable feeling. Mankind, I

think, will face the shark more cheerfully than the loathsome crocodile.

splashed about in clear shallow water, but even that short plunge gave me an uncomfortable feeling. Mankind, I think, will face the shark more cheerfully than the loathsome crocodile.

A band of Bushmen, suspected of stealing cattle from the Okavango tribesmen, were captured and dealt with according to cruel native custom. Two men were roasted alive, two others were held under water and drowned, and three women were thrown to the crocodiles. One woman escaped and reported these dreadful acts of vengeance to the commissioner. Arrests were made, and in the end one Okavango native was sentenced to death. Among the exhibits at the trial were the hands of the Bushman women, found inside a crocodile shot by the missionaries at Nyangana.

The ordinary diet of the crocodile consists of fish. Stones are usually found in the stomach, swallowed as an aid to digestion. But any creature from an ox to a dog may be pulled into the water. It takes a large crocodile to win the grim tug-of-war with an ox, of course, but the Okavango crocodiles often grow up to fourteen feet, and some probably to eighteen.

Neck, brain and shoulder – those are the crocodile's weak spots. I long to be on the banks of the river again with my new rifle, taking part in a merciless war which everyone should encourage – the war on the wicked, hated crocodiles.

“Kfumbuka!” whispered the native paddler, and pointed. I had landed on a sandbank in the Okavango river, and

the native's warning brought the rifle to my shoulder.

As I stared along the sights, wondering but ready for anything, two little twitching ears and a huge dark head broke the calm surface. I lowered my rifle. Next moment there was a sobbing fellow like a whale blowing and the old bull hippo floated there gazing at me with piggy eyes.

“Kfumbuka,” I learnt afterwards, means “which boils” – an accurate description of hippo conduct. For a long time I sat watching this hippo and its mates, reflecting that if I had carried a watch I might have timed the periods when they submerged, rising punctually to boil again. Authorities differ on this point. Some say they can stay below comfortably for ten to twelve minutes; others declare that four minutes is the maximum. A hippo

with only the eyes and nostril-slits exposed can take cover behind a water-lily. Thus it is not always easy to decide whether it is holding its breath prodigiously or merely deceiving the observer.

Hippos can be dangerous at times. No arguments about that. When I told my paddlers to take the canoe further downstream, they first looked nervously at the hippo, then crossed to the far side of the river, pulled the dug-out over a shallow patch, and passed the hippo pool as rapidly as possible. “Never take a canoe between a hippo and deep water,” is the rule they follow.

Normally the hippo is not ferocious. Its eyesight is poor, and I believe that many attacks on canoes are either accidental or due to sheer curiosity. To a submerged hippo a canoe passing

overhead must look very much like a crocodile. If there is a young hippo about, a crocodile means danger. Hence the sudden and devastating attacks which natives always fear.

Young hippos ride on their mothers' backs, and a female hippo with calf may be a savage creature indeed. It is said that the expectant mother hippo will kill all the crocodiles in a pool before the calf is born. At other times they live amicably together, and where you find hippo there will certainly be crocodiles.

Old bull hippos, like "rogue" elephants, are untrustworthy. They fight among themselves, gathering deep scars in their two-inch thick hides, and they will charge boats without warning. While I was hunting along the Okavango a Roman Catholic missionary's canoe was upset, and the

priest regarded himself as lucky to have escaped with only the loss of his rifle and kit. The same missionary, at Nyangana, once owned a fast motor-launch that had cost nearly £1,000 by the time it had been carted overland to the river. If the missionaries had been able to keep the engine running they would probably have escaped, for the noise keeps hippos away. But the motor failed and a hippo finished the launch.

A similar experience was reported by Mr. V. F. Ellenberger, a Bechuanaland magistrate who explored the Okavango swamps in a steel boat. He encountered a herd of thirty hippo in a narrow stream, and at this awkward moment the propeller fouled in a mass of weeds. One hippo came for the boat with enormous mouth gaping. So

vicious was the hippo's bite that the boat had to be beached for repairs.

More remarkable still, a hippo once charged a Nile paddle steamer, smashed a paddle-wheel, and holed the steel hull. There is nothing timid about an angry hippo. On land such attacks are rare, but not unknown. A reliable observer has recorded the adventure of a white hunter who found himself on a hippo path in thick bush when a hippo was returning to the water. The attack was sudden, but the hunter fired in time. He confessed afterwards that up to the moment he pulled the trigger he was under the impression that he was facing a rhinoceros.

A hippo seldom wounds a man. It bites the victim in two. When it wishes to sink a canoe the usual procedure is to tip the canoe first, then place its

ponderous head over the canoe and swamp it. Selous himself lost a canoe in that manner.

Native hippo hunters use spears as harpoons, with ropes and floats attached. Often they succeed in driving the maddened hippo out of the water into the open. Then the spearmen close in and the end is near. Another native method, extremely cruel, consists of starving a herd of hippo to death. This is carried out when the river is low. A pool is fenced in with stakes and surrounded by fires. Drums are beaten night and day. The trapped hippos become so weak at last that they are speared without danger.

Okavango chiefs on the South-West African side of the river are granted permission, at long intervals, to kill a hippo. This is a reward for good behaviour, greatly appreciated. But

Harold Eedes told me that only two hippo had been killed during the previous seven years. A missionary had shot one in self-defence, while another, a dangerous “rogue,” had been destroyed by Eedes himself. He estimated that there were about thirty-five hippo along the 250 miles of river in his area, and he did not wish to see the species exterminated.

The Portuguese on the far side grant licences readily to shoot the “carval de marine,” as they call it. Hippo are plentiful in the Kwito and other rivers of Angola. A Greek hunter boasted that he had shot five hundred hippo there, and sold them – hide, meat and fat – at £20 apiece. He was deported for his exploits. By that time he was a cripple, too, for he had twice been mauled by wounded hippo.

The hippo is one of the easiest creatures in Africa to shoot. There is ample time to aim, and a brain shot with a heavy rifle and solid bullet should be fatal every time. The body of a dead hippo disappears, but the eager natives will recover it downstream within twenty-four hours. The dark red meat resembles beef rather than pork, and often the natives do not leave even a scrap of skin. Hippo hide, the old material of sjambok, “kiboko” and warrior’s shield, is now turned into card-trays and other souvenirs for African tourists.

Moslem natives are not permitted to eat the meat of any member of the swine tribe. They overcome this religious ban by classing the hippo as fish!

There is no danger of the species becoming extinct in Africa as a whole. Indeed, hippo are so plentiful and so troublesome in some areas that they have been declared "vermin." Prowling at night in search of grass, they create havoc among crops of sugar cane and maize. A white farmer on the edge of a lake in East Africa dug trenches and put up barbed-wire entanglements to keep the hippos off his land; but they went through the defences like tanks.

They are found in surprising places at times – swimming in the open seas, or climbing mountains in Kenya to an altitude of seven thousand feet. Cold does not affect them, even when the water is almost freezing. But on a sweltering day you will find them floating lazily in their pools, the most comfortable creatures in Africa.

If ever I wished to hide in Africa, I should know where to go. This secret territory, which I shall reveal, might serve as a refuge from a world in chaos. White men have found sanctuary there before-outlaws, odd characters of several nations, hermits who hated cities. There they remained for years, unknown and undiscovered.

Few corners of Africa nowadays are remote enough to shelter a white man. News of the coming of a stranger is tapped out on drums and discussed in every village. A murderer hunted in a city stands a far better chance of escaping detection, as a rule, than a white man on the march in the unmapped African bush.

Yet there is this last corner. There men have lived on the resources of the land. Strange lives they led. Come

with me to the extreme north-eastern frontier of South-West Africa, gaze on the Okavango river and beyond, and hear the tale of wild times and desperate expeditions... .

On this side of the river are thousands of square miles of trackless bush. Across the river lies Angola, the province of Lower Cubango; mile after mile of plain and bush, of rivers strewn with islands, of sand and swamp. Here is Africa's most perfect hiding place.

As long as you have cartridges your larder will be full. Game, which is abundant, may be exchanged with the natives for wild fruits and wild, dark honey, grain, eggs and milk. In the rivers the fat bream and voracious tiger fish rush to be hooked. Guinea-fowl roost in hundreds in the trees.

Assuredly you need not fear starvation.

I first heard details of this "lost world" from a Cape Town man who had taken canoes up the Kwito river and hunted the sable antelope far beyond the last outpost. "The Portuguese I met had never explored the Kwito," this man declared. "I was told that no one had been so far up the river since the elephant hunter, Axel Eriksson, had travelled there in the 'eighties of last century."

So I, too, was lured to the hunter's paradise across the Okavango river. First it was necessary to pay a formal call at Fort Kuangar, headquarters of the Portuguese administrator, Senhor Rosendo Carvalheira.

Fort Kuangar is worth visiting because only there, and at one other outpost,

Diriko, will you see the flag of Portugal. The land is without roads or trading stations, without even a rare police patrol to bring a semblance of government into the distant villages. In all these 6,000 square miles of territory you will find white people only at Kuangar and Diriko.

The exiles of the lonely seat of government at Kuangar look out over a scene of old disaster. A grim story it was that I gathered from them, and from other sources.

No fort stands at Kuangar today, but there was a castellated white fort in 1912, when the energetic governor d'Almeida defeated all the rebellious tribes of the south. Then came the First Great War. You will remember that Portugal and Germany were not officially at war until 1916. Nevertheless, there was war on this river.

A German magistrate, visiting another part of Angola with two white officers, had been arrested by the Portuguese on the ground that he was stirring up revolt among the natives. When the Germans refused to submit to arrest and rode away, they were shot down. One officer escaped, and reprisals were planned.

Opposite Kuangar there was a German frontier post, Kuring Kuru. The German military police and the Portuguese were on friendly terms; and on October 31, 1914, they breakfasted together, drank wine and parted like brothers. Meanwhile reinforcements had arrived at Kuring Kuru with orders to attack Kuangar, destroy the fort and give no quarter. A fine sequel to a friendly breakfast!

One of the German soldiers (now a trader in South-West Africa) told me

that the German force consisted of an officer named Lehmann, a sergeant-major, about twenty white troopers and ten black police constables. The unsuspecting Portuguese had two white officers and about fifty askaris (native soldiers). The Germans crossed the river in canoes about a mile below the fort, crept through the bush and surprised the garrison. In spite of the sudden attack, the Portuguese managed to load an ancient cannon and fire twice. Then the German machine-guns came into action, the defenders of the gate were killed, and the invaders stormed into the courtyard.

“No quarter!” A Portuguese lieutenant named Durao, who tried to hide in his bedroom wardrobe, was dragged out mercilessly and shot. Another officer, trying to escape in his nightshirt, was

sniped and killed. Twenty Portuguese Askaris lay dead when the flag was hauled down by the Germans. Only one German was wounded. The fort was looted and burnt so thoroughly that I could find hardly a trace of it. On the scene of the massacre the Portuguese have built a small memorial.

The modern Kuangar consists of a row of tiled houses, reminiscent of Madeira, with a half-finished, roofless hospital standing apart. Step into Senhor Carvalheira’s bungalow and learn more of this far corner. There are many books in paraffin cases, a lottery calendar, a leopard skin and a huge map of the country. The whole Lower Cubango province bears only two names – Kuangar, and a smaller fort named Diriko, situated where the Kwito river joins the Okavango.

I gathered that Senhor Carvalheira seldom left headquarters. He wore a leather jacket, he was shaking with the chills of malaria, and it was impossible to tempt him out on an exploring expedition. There was no need; the natives were “pacífico.” His assistant, d’Almeida, I was told, sometimes went out on foot or with a dromedary. But the province was too large, and there was no proper transport. “Time!” sighed Senhor Cavalheira. He spoke little English, but I gathered that in time the hospital would be built, in time his broken-down motor-car would be repaired, in time the authorities at Silva Porto might send a new steam-engine for the official launch. (Until that happy day the twenty-five paddlers will have to carry on.)

The Portuguese use the river – they do not penetrate far into the hinterland of the province. I stood beside the grave of a Portuguese naval officer who had been sent to survey the river, and died at Kuangar in 1912 – blackwater fever. The survey has never been completed, the map remains blank save for the two river stations I have mentioned.

“Port, whisky, beer, wine ... all good for malaria,” declared Senhor Carvalheira, uncorking a bottle on the netted veranda. Then my friends and I took “breakfast” with the Senhor and his family. The negro doctor was invited, a short, suave man from the West African island of St. Thome. “Twenty years have I lived in Lisbon,” the doctor informed us. His white wife did not attend the party, but we saw her peering, a little nervously perhaps,

through a window. Angola society is full of surprises for the newcomer.

Ten of us sat down at noon to a formidable meal. "Better to have a small table and many friends than to eat alone at a large table," observed the Senhor with genuine kindness. For a man who only knew a few English phrases it was well said.

"Presta!" ordered Senhor Carvalheira, and the servants brought the first course of salt cod. Meat with eggs, spinach and mashed potatoes followed; the red wine flowed so that it became unwise to empty a glass; more meat with rice appeared; then custard with honey; and at last, to our relief, the coffee. Senhora Carvalheira sat with dignity at the head of the table; her unmarried sister at the other end. Both women were dark and handsome and slender, smart in the

Portuguese fashion. They did not speak. I was puzzled by the presence of a well-behaved seven-year-old mulatto girl in the chair next to me. "Zat is my daughter," explained the Senhor. He was proud of her, and his wife treated the little girl with affection, though she was not her daughter.

Permits to shoot were issued, and I strolled heavily round Kuangar with the doctor and young d'Almeida before returning to the canoes. I saw the pet ostrich, about the only creature which may not be hunted in the territory. The Portuguese have an idea that wild ostriches will become valuable one day. I visited the vegetable garden, for which I had brought seeds, and was shown how each plant was protected by rushes from the winter sun. A "machila," like

a hammock on a stout pole, was brought out and tested. It is carried by teams of natives and an official travelling in this swaying, uncomfortable contraption can proceed along native paths at a speed of nineteen miles a day. No wonder Senhor Carvalheira prefers to remain at headquarters.

Diriko, the sub-station lies more than 150 miles down the river – about a fortnight's journey in canoes, and nearly three weeks returning upstream. Diriko at the time of the native campaigns, was a large fort with a colonel in charge. Like Kuangar, it was wiped out by the Germans in 1914. The Portuguese rebuilt it on a smaller scale, with a heavy stockade. But the "chef du poste" at Diriko is a lonely man. In this most southerly outpost of Angola he may not see a

white face more than once in two years, apart from the neighbouring missionaries at Nyangana.

Such areas have always attracted the white adventurer, and in the Lower Cubango there have been many...

The great hunter Selous himself was there once with a companion named French. One day Selous and French became separated in the waterless bush. Selous, searching feverishly for the lost man, heard a shot far away, picked up the tracks, and came at last to a giraffe French had shot for the stomach water. The tracks went on into the bush, revealing the strides of a man panic stricken by extreme thirst. Selous found French's rifle, with a farewell message scratched on the stock. Night stopped the pursuit. Though he went on tracking, no further sign of French was ever found.

Here, too, an early German explorer was lost and wandered for seventy miles before his companion reached him. The man's tongue was black and shrivelled, the soles of his feet blistered.

Undoubtedly the queerest and most tragic figure to make a home in this "lost world" was Ben Johnson, known to the natives as "Kapitulo" (khaki shorts). Johnson arrived in South Africa as a well-educated young English cavalryman during the Boer War. He became a hunter and trader in Rhodesia, and when the First Great War broke out he was selected as one of a small party of scouts to watch the frontier between German South-West Africa and Angola. After the surrender, when his duties ended, Johnson decided to remain as a hermit in "the blue."

Old father Bierfert of the Nyangana mission was visited by "Kapitulo" on several occasions, and described the man to me. "A fine man, that Johnson," exclaimed Father Bierfert. "So strong, with hair and beard like a lion, blue eyes, a good-looking man – but so unhappy he must have been."

Happy or unhappy – his psychology remains a mystery. Johnson lived in great solitude from 1916 to 1924. He shot elephants and sold ivory; and during those years he killed twenty-seven lions. "One of the most fearless and certain shots in Africa, declared men who had seen him at work.

But the hermit shot only to earn money for books and a simple life. Any chance traveller who brought him literature was welcome at his rough homestead on the Luliana river. When he heard of a white man anywhere

within a hundred miles he would start exchanging books by means of native runners.

Johnson was an author and a poet, too. English reviews and the "Sydney Bulletin" published his work, and some of his poems were reprinted in anthologies. His best friend, probably, was Captain Arnold Wienholt, D.S.O., the Australian big-game hunter, who first met him during the war, and who was drawn back to this lonely corner of Africa, at intervals of years, on a number of lone expeditions. Father Bierfert had met Wienholt, too, at a time when Wienholt's right arm was useless as a result of a lion bite.

Wienholt gave Johnson a first-class character, and declared that he was "generous to a fault." Another traveller, however, declared that Johnson was moody and aggressive,

and refused to meet a white woman. (I do not suppose that more than one passed that way during the eight years Johnson lived by the Luliana.) It became clear, however, that the self-imposed exile slowly drove this educated man into a depression from which there was no recovery.

In 1924 a Greek named Harris Johns came to live in this wilderness, settling down only a few miles away from Johnson. The Greek had been in trouble with various authorities for ivory poaching; he had been deported from South-West Africa and Rhodesia; but like others he found sanctuary outside the law in the land of undefined frontiers. Johns was a cripple. He boasted that he had shot five hundred hippo, and there was no doubt that he had been mauled. On the

Marshi he had a garden and confined his shooting to small game.

Johnson and Johns were friendly at first. The cause of the final tragedy will never be known, but it appears that Johnson walked over to his neighbour's shack one day and shot him dead with a pistol. The demented Johnson then returned to his own homestead, shot his cattle and his riding mule, piled all his books and possessions into a cart and set fire to it. Finally he walked naked into the river and shot himself, evidently hoping that his body would be carried away. It was not. Natives found and buried the body. Then came bush fires, leaving no trace of the home of "Kapitulo" Johnson.

His memory lingers. Wienholt, years afterwards, revisited the spot and left a little memorial plate on a tree. That

night a lion prowled silently round Wienholt's camp. When the natives saw the tracks in the morning they said: "That was Kapitulo. You can see he meant us no harm. He was a friend of our master, and came just to see and greet him."

Farther Bierfert remembered other men who had called at his mission and then plunged into the unknown across the river. Five of his fellow-countrymen, disliking the idea of surrendering to the South African troops after the occupation of the colony escaped into this "no man's land." Under the leadership of Wilhelm Mattenklodt these Germans became an elusive band of happy free-booters. Mattenklodt, a farmer and hunter before the war, was. "wanted" by the Union authorities for attempting to help German officers to escape

from an internment camp. Before he could be arrested Mattenklodt went back to his own farm near Grootfontein and equipped himself with a Mauser rifle, revolver and ammunition, previously stowed away in a hollow tree. He took a riding horse, a pack horse, blankets and food.

I know the Grootfontein district. The farms are enormous, the bush is thick, and I can understand how Mattenklodt avoided capture for months. The farmers were his friends, and he was able to dodge all police patrols. Finally he met four other Germans, and formed the bold plan of riding across Africa to join General Von Lettow Vorbeck who was still fighting in Tanganyika.

Mattenklodt, Hoppner, Bergmann, Becker and Funk, five adventurers seeking freedom, secured a wagon and

ten oxen, loaded it with stores, and in July 1916 they set out for the Okavango river. Mattenklodt had travelled over the route five years before, on a hunting trip with a party of Boers. He brought the fugitives safely to Father Bierfert's mission in a trek of sixteen days. (I covered almost the same ground in a day by motor-car.) At Nyangana the native chief helped them, the wagon was dismantled and ferried across to Angola by canoes, and the five Germans began to feel safer.

After a visit to another German mission, beautiful Andara down the river, they engaged Bushmen guides and disappeared. Roan antelope and eland provided them with meat. They had cloth, brass bracelets, salt and beads for trading with the natives. After months of pleasant hunting

without a rumour of pursuit, they decided to build a rain-proof house and settle down comfortably for the rainy season. Funk grew vegetables and, of course, tobacco, while the others hunted giraffe and bartered the meat for mealies with the nearest chief. They also hunted elephant, and later they were able to sell the tusks. A hippo hunt at the Popo Rapids – one of Africa's unknown beauty spots – completed the unusual holiday. A full year they spent in “no man's land” before deciding to trek back to Groot-fontein. They had enjoyed themselves so much that the idea of taking part in the war again had been abandoned.

Four of the party were captured soon after the return to the farming area. Mattenklodt the elusive, hard pressed by the military police, was sheltered by an old hunting partner, Wilhelm;

and in May, 1917, Mattenklodt and Wilhelm moved off along the waterless track to find complete freedom in the wilderness. At first they were ill-equipped. Tea and bread formed their meals until they reached the promised land along the river. The missionaries at Andara remembered how the fugitives relished a dinner there with wine. In his former haunts Mattenklodt shot for eight more months. On one trip he penetrated far south into Bechuanaland without encountering an enemy. His narrowest escape was when a snake crawled over his pillow in the darkness.

Up to the armistice Mattenklodt and Wilhelm remained at liberty. Only when they reached the coast of Angola in an attempt to return to Germany were they placed for a spell in a Portuguese prison. Mattenklodt died in

Swakopmund a few years ago, but I believe Wilhelm is still farming in South-West Africa.

One more tale of a “Robinson Crusoe” in this tropical paradise of Angola, and I have finished. I shall have to call the man Von X. “Ach, Von X – his life was a romance,” declared Father Bierfert.

It was all the more romantic, to my mind, because the episode occurred only a few years before the Second Great War.

He was a blond giant, this Von X, a German aristocrat of, the old military caste, middle-aged when he set off into Angola to collect specimens of rare game for a museum. His wife and young son went with him.

Madame Von X was an attractive woman. I gather that she was “stolen”

by a Portuguese officer, and that the action taken by Von X caused him to hurry southwards (as you can guess) to the sanctuary of the Lower Cubango. Von X made his home on an island in the Kwito river, Popa island, about sixty miles by canoe from Father Bierfert’s mission.

In such a country a white man needs ammunition if he is to make a living. Father Bierfert helped Von X, who was thus able to hunt elephant and collect ivory without the usual overhead expenses in the shape of licence fees. (It costs £5 to shoot a tusker in Angola.) For several years Von X made the island his base, and there his young son grew up, rather like a native.

Once Father Bierfert received an urgent message. “Please come – I am dying of blackwater. Von X.” But

when the kindhearted priest arrived at Popa island, the tough aristocrat had nursed himself successfully through an illness which is often fatal.

Von X might be ruling his island today but for one mistake. He wanted cattle and he wrote to certain natives in South-West African territory offering guns in exchange. Gun-running, even on such a small scale is a serious matter on this frontier. The long arm of the law gripped the unfortunate Von X. I believe he was deported to Germany. This mention of his adventures is far from complete, but it gives another sidelight on the "lost world" of the Lower Cubango.

New dramas will be played in the Angola "no man's land" before the territory becomes a scene of commercial enterprise, cut up neatly and exploited by companies. I wonder

who the next adventurers will be and I wish them a better fate than that of poor "Kapitulo" Johnson.

CHAPTER 15

SOUTH AFRICAN AIR FORCE

ONE AFTERNOON in the uneasy month of August 1939 I boarded a liner in Table Bay docks to interview a chubby little man with a great reputation for legal shrewdness – the late Lord Hewart, Chief Justice of Great Britain. He had that day arrived from England.

“I hope that no one in South Africa thinks there is going to be a war,” remarked Lord Hewart. “I do not know one sensible person in London who fears an explosion in Europe – not one.”

Some of the most brilliant minds seem to fail when war is in the air. Chamberlain’s voice came through the loudspeaker into my comfortable home in Cape Town. The overloaded

cable services were delaying Press messages that day, and I was taking a shorthand note for the newspaper. I heard the words “We are now at war,” and my hand trembled so that I had to pour out a glass of brandy before I could go on writing.

From that moment history began repeating itself for me, and for thousands more. I went down to Table Bay Docks that afternoon and found that already the fishing trawlers were being converted into minesweepers. On the quayside stood a senior naval officer. I had known him for years; he had sailed my small yacht in races, and I had been to sea with him, charting the South African coast. I asked him whether he could see any opening for me in the naval service at that moment. Quite rightly he shook his head.

If I had been content to wait I might have found a niche for myself in a suit of navy blue. But now the same restlessness which had gripped me at the age of eighteen was surging up in my mind at thirty-nine. I saw a respite from twenty years of newspaper work looming ahead. Then I heard that the South African Air Force had invited members of my yacht club to join the new crash boat section. I liked the idea of racing out to rescue distressed airmen in a high-speed launch and applied for a commission. It was a long time before I received an answer, and meanwhile other younger members were enlisting as corporals. At last a letter arrived offering me a post as an “administrative officer,” with the rank of lieutenant. It was, of course, subject to medical fitness and

so I found myself at the Castle again, awaiting the doctor’s pleasure.

The doctor examined me in the same room in which I had stood stripped twenty-two years before. My memories and my anxiety made my heart thump loudly. The aged medical officer dropped his stethoscope and gave me a penetrating stare.

“Ever done any rowing?” he inquired casually.

I knew what he was driving at. “I’ve done a lot of sailing – but I usually let someone else do the rowing.”

“Ah! You have what we call ‘Athlete’s Heart.’” He pondered for a moment. “Do you want this job very badly?”

“I’d like to do something useful during the war.”

The doctor filled in my medical forms, pinned down the envelope, and sent me back to the staff officer in charge of recruiting. On the way back I unpinned the envelope and found that I had been passed fit for service “anywhere in Africa” – the highest category. I took the oath and departed to settle my affairs.

But a doubt had entered my mind. No one likes to be told that he has heart trouble. I went to the most experienced medical specialist I know, and stood in front of the X-ray. There was no sign of enlargement. The medical officer had made a mistake. Pretoria was my destination, and everyone in uniform had to make endless journeys between the far corners of the Union and Pretoria. On April 24, 1940, I reported at Air Headquarters, Pretoria, and was posted to the training depot. For three

days I drilled on the square, and liked it. I lay on my back on the grass and exercised my legs. I attended a lecture on “the ideal bomb.” Army life had no terrors for me. When I found my name on the list as orderly officer, I let the sergeant-major shout the orders, mounted the guard and took the salute at the right moment just as I had done at the age of eighteen, but with more aplomb.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly. Old friends arrived almost daily, including some I had not seen since Walmer and Guildford Castle days. The catering at the South African Air Force mess was excellent, and there was good company at the bar in the evenings.

On the fourth day, however, I was given a chit stating that I was an “efficient regimental officer,” and I

was instructed to report for duty to Air Headquarters. I sensed unknown hazards, and I was right. Shortly after my posting to Air Headquarters there was a public holiday. The officer in command of my section called me in and spoke apologetically. "You're the latest arrival here, Green – I'll have to get you to take charge on Thursday." I did not mind that, but when I arrived on the Thursday I found that I was not merely in charge of a section, but of Air Headquarters. South Africa had not yet begun to take the war seriously, and the whole staff had gone off to play golf. There were a couple of wireless operators on duty, and by applying newspaper principles to the incoming signals I got through the day successfully in spite of my inexperience.

Nevertheless, I still had everything to learn, and there were many occasions when I realised my limitations. I completed the seniority roll, and was then informed that a senior officer wished to see me. I had heard of this officer before the war as head of a civil aviation firm and someone had told me that he was "a bit of a humorist." Happily I marched in, ready to be amused. The officer put a few searching questions. I answered him as intelligently as I could – too intelligently perhaps, for he made me his personal assistant and for the next four months I found myself linked with a human dynamo and working as I had never worked since the Ingerid.

Enormous heaps of official correspondence were dumped on my desk each day. There is nothing more nerve-racking than attempting a job

one does not understand, and under this taskmaster I had to learn fast. I discovered with a thrill that many envelopes had other envelopes inside marked "Secret." I was in charge of the secret files. Returns, orders, pay certificates, nominal rolls, reports of all kinds flooded in on me. I had to invent lists of passwords. Signals arrived in cipher, and I solved them with the aid of a keyword; far more exciting than a crossword puzzle. A disastrous day came when I was instructed to send a signal in cipher. I did my best, but some time later replies were received from every air force station in South Africa – "not understood, not understood." Scores of officers must have laboured for hours trying to achieve the impossible. No one could crack my cipher.

One job beat me completely. I was given a huge sheet of squared paper bearing masses of statistics, which I was required to keep up to date. This sheet reflected the strength of the South African Air Force in every mustering from day to day. Now I am one of those people who are dazzled by figures; yet figures were showered on me until those statistics became a nightmare. Day after day I added new totals but I never knew what I was doing. I felt like a bank cashier who had faked his accounts, and wondered when the day of reckoning would come.

When senior officers visited Air Headquarters there would be a sudden demand for my statistics. "This gives you the whole picture," the staff officer would announce proudly. I was not so sure about that. Then one day a

voice over the telephone informed me that the Secretary for Finance was demanding my figures. I knew it. The figures were overdue. I rattled off the totals over the 'phone. Long afterwards, when a professional statistician had taken over the job, I learnt that I was four hundred men out in my calculations.

The senior officer I was assisting was one of those people who are bound inevitably to succeed. He had an impressive build and an overpowering manner. Within a minute, by skilful questioning, he could sum up any man's capabilities – and woe betide the bluffer and the imposter. He succeeded because he was willing to undertake any responsibility. If any section of the air force had become muddled owing to rapid wartime expansion, he would offer to

straighten it out. This he did by bringing in men he knew to be efficient, and giving them the authority to put things right. "I want your personal guarantee that so-and-so will not happen again," was one of his favourite phrases. A guarantee of this kind was as binding as a monastic vow.

It was not long before he discovered that I could write shorthand. From that moment he wrote no more minutes himself. At the end of many a long day spent in seeing innumerable people he would close the door glance at the huge stack of files in front of him, and say: "Come on, Green – let's get stuck into this." Then the real day's work would begin, at five-thirty in the afternoon. Before long, as Director of Air Personnel, he was wearing the red staff tabs of a full colonel, and he

deserved the promotion. If he had been offered the Prime Minister's job he would have accepted that, too, and to each member of his cabinet he would have said: "I want your personal guarantee..."

Each morning at Defence Headquarters the directors of the various air force departments met in conference, and I took a shorthand note of the proceedings. Interesting work, for I learnt many wartime secrets. Squadron after squadron was leaving for the Abyssinian front. Owing to a shortage of administrative officers, however, there were still young pilots sitting in offices at headquarters and seeking ways of escape. Among them was a Lieutenant Oscar Coetzee, who stood in his doorway for hours staring piteously at every senior officer who passed. When a colonel

stopped to ask Oscar what he was doing Oscar always replied: "Nothing." This method could not fail, and before very long Oscar found himself in East Africa. He was one of the heroes of the "unofficial bombing raid" – a story that went round the world. So many inaccurate versions have appeared that I am going to give it here as it was told to me by Oscar Coetzee.

Coetzee and another lieutenant named Charles Kearey were flying Valentia troop carriers, transporting casualties and other passengers between the front and the base. They tired of this routine, and decided to take a more active part in the war. There was an Italian fort within range of the Valentia, and this was the target selected. Transport pilots were not supplied with bombs, so they called an

engineer officer into the circle and asked him to supply the ingredients.

All that night they worked on the bomb. A forty-gallon oil drum was filled with more than four hundred sticks of dynamite from the engineer's camp. They broke up an old sewing machine, dropped in a motor-car differential and other scraps of iron. A fuse was prepared. Careful calculations were made in which the solemn speed of the Valentia (about 90 miles an hour) and the length of fuse were important factors.

Towards dawn all was ready, and the Valentia's twin engines bore her away like a gigantic, lumbering locust bent on destruction. The engineer officer sat in the cabin nursing the dangerous cargo. Against all orders he smoked cigarette after cigarette, so that when the great moment arrived he could

touch off the fuse. In such a lawless affair one more breach of the regulations hardly seemed to matter. Kearey was at the controls. He flew very low, intent on taking the Italians by surprise. Also he was determined not to miss the fort. When the mud walls of the Italian outpost appeared in sight, he was dead on his course. Coetzee estimated the distance and gave the signal. The engineer officer lit the fuse and attempted to kick the oil drum out of the doorway at the end of the cabin.

At this interesting point the enterprise almost met with disaster. The bomb jammed in the doorway. Frantically Kearey signalled that he was making another circuit. The fuse, a long one fortunately, was smoking away and anxious moments were experienced by all on board. By this time, too, the

element of surprise had been lost, and the Italians were firing wildly at the monstrous shape overhead. The Valentia swung round for another attack; such men as these never considered making for home with their mission unaccomplished. Again the signal was given. This time the engineer, with his back to the bulkhead and pushing with both feet, succeeded in releasing the bomb at exactly the right moment.

It fell in the courtyard of the fort, but the fuse had not yet reached the dynamite. The Italians, having taken cover, hearing no explosion crept out cautiously. They saw the oil drum and apparently decided that it might contain a message. The garrison of the fort gathered inquisitively round the drum at the very moment the light reached the dynamite.

Not far away overhead the eager watchers in the Valentia were rocked perilously by the blast. Happily they steered for home. It was only when the excitement died down that Coetzee realised that he had been slightly wounded in the foot by a rifle bullet from the ground. The bullet had found a way out, and when Coetzee went to the medical officer he explained that he had cut himself on a broken bottle while swimming.

For the next few nights the unofficial bombers tuned in regularly to the news service from Radio Roma. At last they heard the item they were awaiting. "A large unidentified aircraft bombed Fort X, causing damage and a number of casualties," said the announcer. It was later confirmed that 37 of the enemy, including several Italian officers, had been killed.

But meanwhile the Italian report had aroused some mystification at Air Headquarters, East Africa. An operation had been planned with the object of destroying this very fort; and here was the job done before the South African Air Force bombers had set out! The investigation made the two lieutenants a little uncomfortable. They were told that home-made bombs were frowned upon officially but there was a chuckle behind the rebuke. The tale of the home-made bomb and the unofficial raid became one of the jokes of the campaign.

The atmosphere of Defence Headquarters was never to my liking. I wore the air force uniform with eagles on my badges and buttons; but I was a caged eagle. Then the South African Women's Auxiliary Air Force

appeared suddenly in our midst, and I saw a way of escape. I was posted to an Air Navigation School at the Cape. A run of a thousand miles lay ahead of me, but I drove my car southwards alone with a song in my heart and covered the ground in one and a half days.

It seemed like a holiday after the feverish days at Defence Headquarters. Captain Jacques Lorentz, the squadron commander, who was later to become Lieutenant-Colonel and a commander of a bomber squadron in Italy was a pleasant and considerate man with long pre-war experience of flying. I worked in the hangar, in a world of parachutes, pilots' log books, petrol receipts, machine guns, technical orders, lifejackets marine distress signals, rubber dinghies and fire appliances.

The squadron was equipped with Ansons and many an hour I spent in the air with Lorentz, testing new aircraft or practising formation flying over the great bays and mountains of the Cape. A grand sight it is to look out of the window and watch an Anson poised and floating alongside, with only a few feet between the wing-tips, so close that you can see the grins on the faces of the crews. Sometimes the grins were wiped off; that was when the pilots inadvertently came too close.

October 1, 1940, was the date of the total eclipse of the sun, visible only from a few ships at sea and from a narrow belt, 120 miles wide, across the Cape Province. On that day I made a memorable flight – one such as few people have ever made. Lorentz took me right into the path of the eclipse,

and at eight thousand feet we flew through the great darkness.

Airborne at 2.40 in the afternoon the Anson passed over my seaside cottage on the shores of Table Bay, over the yellow wheat lands, over farms where I had shot often and bays where I had anchored in small yachts. Every landmark on this run was familiar to me. We followed the “Diamond Road” northwards towards Namaqualand, over the peaks of the Cedarberg and the hot valley of the Olifants River. As we flew we peered through smoked glasses and saw the outer fringe of the moon’s shadow eating into the sun. Larger and larger grew the dark segment, until only a thin sickle of sun remained, daylight faded, and we turned on the warmers in the aircraft’s cabin.

I could still see the dry coastal plain of Namaqualand. I thought of the day I had been lost in that wilderness, struggling in the sand; and the time when I had searched the same waste for a lost airman. To the west the South Atlantic beat on rocky shores, where I had often stopped to talk to lonely policemen guarding the diamond beaches. Sunlight still sparkled on the waters.

Then, as I stared at the sea there was a dramatic transformation, swifter than anything I had seen. The shadow of the moon, racing across the ocean at more than a thousand miles an hour, blacked out the sun glitter, struck the coast like a tornado, and plunged us into an unreal world. I felt like a character in James Hilton's "Lost Horizon." Lorentz, who has an odd sense of humour, set up a weird

moaning which blended with the scene. It was almost frightening. The light belonged neither to the day nor to the night, yet it was possible to see vague shapes in the cabin. I tried to set my camera to photograph the corona, and I found I could not see the lens.

Where the sun had been, the solar corona now burst out clouds of shattered atoms blown from the sun by the pressure of intense light. The corona was a red flame glowing round the shadowed disc, an aureole with pale yellow streamers, like feathers from an angel's wing. The stupendous spectacle dominated our world.

I thought of the astronomers working feverishly below, after months of planning and rehearsing, to make each priceless second of the eclipse yield its secrets. Some of them had come from America bringing many tons of

equipment. For all of them it was the event of the century.

The Anson droned on through the darkness. We could see Mercury and Venus. The moon's shadow covered us for almost four minutes. Then the sudden, explosive return of the light, spears of sunlight – and farewell to that rare corona which, I suppose, I shall never set eyes upon again.

As the Anson turned south I saw on the roads such a procession of traffic that I felt thankful to be flying. Thousands had gone to the eclipse zone; now they were returning to Cape Town, bumper to bumper, in swirling dust. (It reminded me of nothing at the time, but there came a day in the Libyan desert when I drove a truck in just such a procession, and with every reason for haste.) We had left the aerodrome after lunch, and tea was

ready for us when we landed. That is the way to view an eclipse. I wondered whether anyone had seen a total eclipse of the sun in that way before.

Among the ground instructors at the school were a genial schoolmaster who wore the old R.F.C. wings, a university professor an old naval officer, two young master mariners, and a former R.A.F. officer who had written a standard textbook on air navigation. Finally there was a man who had served his apprenticeship in sail, been on the stage, owned a tomato farm in Canada and managed an English inn. It was a most efficient school (apart from the administrative officer) and the training went as far as fixing position with a bubble-sextant by the stars at night.

The Ansons flew far out to sea on their exercises, but always they returned

safely. No serious accident occurred during my nine months at the school, though I remember one amusing incident. An absent-minded staff pilot (a landscape gardener in civil life) forgot to wind down his undercarriage for a night landing. He put the Anson down flat, smashing the propellers. His crew were unaware that anything unusual had happened. On these occasions I had to take statements from all concerned, and this incident was difficult to explain.

Later in the same month I flew with Lorentz from Cape Town to Pretoria. That early morning the Anson sailed over the sharp toothed Hex River mountains like a speed-boat on a lake. I had brought no food with me, expecting breakfast at Beaufort West. We refuelled and went on. Kimberley was the next stop, and I looked down

the “Big Hole,” glanced at the tin roofs and felt relieved that I was no longer living there. They provided tea on the aerodrome, but still we had nothing to eat. Lorentz gave me the controls at one stage of the journey; but it was not merely bumpy, the Anson was shuddering in waves of heat, and I made such a poor showing that one of the passengers lay down and vomited. There were three others in the aircraft that day. One was Flight-sergeant Reynecke from the navigation school, an old permanent force mechanic with a dry humour. He was my chief adviser in the hangar. The other two were officers, Major Shearer of the artillery and Squadron-leader Loudon, R.A.F., who was bound for Khartoum. Both Shearer and Loudon were killed soon afterwards in different air crashes. I

still regard the air as a treacherous element. Never will you convince me that flying is as safe as motoring or travelling by ocean liner. I have lost too many friends in the air.

In June, 1941, I was suddenly taken out of the navigation school and put in charge of the publicity for an air circus. The authorities did not like to call it an air circus but that is the only possible phrase. It was a recruiting campaign in disguise, of course, and a service squadron was detached to tour the whole Union and give a series of flying displays. It provided me with new problems. The advertising cost £5,000. I wrote a booklet, prepared innumerable “hand outs” for the newspapers, ordered photographs, hired cinema films, inspired posters. All this with the two stars of a lieutenant on my shoulder. It would

not have been a difficult task for me in peace-time but anyone who knows the military system will understand the risks I had to take. At the end of all this preliminary planning I secured a staff car and drove right round South Africa ahead of the circus feeding propaganda to the newspapers. The staff car was good, anyway – on a national road, with a following wind, I made the speedometer needle flicker on the hundred mark.

Meanwhile there was heavy fighting in the Middle East, and I felt that I was wasting my time in South Africa. I approached many influential people, engaged in much diplomacy; but when the air circus was over it seemed that I was doomed to remain in Pretoria. I sank into a sombre mood, for I was becoming desperate. Then my telephone rang and an old friend of

many desert journeys spoke. He was a man with a large private income and tastes similar to my own – yachts and wandering up and down the world. Few have travelled more widely; in fact, he had even made the Russian transcontinental train journey. Once he settled in Tahiti, but always, from the ends of the earth, South Africa called him back. As a youth he had suffered from a weak chest, but he had recovered in Switzerland. Soon after the outbreak of war he joined the South African Air Force crash-boat section. He had owned motor yachts, and he became a coxswain with the rank of corporal. Then his chest gave trouble again and he was invalided out of the service. After a rest in his luxurious home he contrived to re-enlist as a clerk. They gave him a low medical category, but a friendly doctor

raised it. Now he was a sergeant, and he was telling me that he had succeeded in getting himself drafted to North Africa. This was good-bye.

“I’ll get there before you,” I promised him.

That afternoon I waited outside the door of the Director of Air Personnel. I heard the deep, familiar voice booming inside, and at last I was admitted. “I’ve finished the publicity job, sir – and I am very anxious to serve in the Middle East.”

“All right, Green.” He scribbled a note. “It will be a long business getting you up there – the aircraft are full up. May take a few months.”

The note was a posting to the Mobile Air Force Depot, which handled everyone going on active service. I knew the commanding officer. “The

D.A.P. would like you to get me away as soon as possible, sir,” I lied.

Others, I knew had been waiting for months. I drew a revolver, a waterproof groundsheet and a couple of haversacks. Within a fortnight, on October 15, 1941, I was watching Pretoria drop away below a silver Lodestar’s tiny wings. I lit the first of many mid air cigarettes with a great sense of satisfaction. In the past I had paid for most of my wanderings in tropical Africa. Here was adventure free, a high adventure and a swift one. Now indeed was all Africa below me.

Kit had been a problem, for the regulations said forty pounds. I solved it by leaving my heavily-loaded haversacks outside the weighing-room. As I marched out to the aircraft I picked up my haversacks and carried

them nonchalantly into the cabin. Now I was complete and bound for Cairo.

I had been given no inkling of the post to which I was being sent. Shrewdly I suspected a headquarters job. My route-form merely instructed me to report to the Assistant Director of Air Personnel. This was a friend of mine, Captain Noel Gilfillan, a Johannesburg solicitor in civil life. Noel had a rare sense of humour, and I looked forward to meeting him again in the exotic surroundings of Cairo.

I looked round the Lodestar’s cabin. There were three army chaplains among my fellow passengers, one of them a rabbi. The rabbi had never been aloft before, and later in the flight I recorded some of his remarks. I saw a fighter-pilot I know, going to join a squadron in the north; and a famous flying “ace” of the last war,

travelling as a civilian on government business.

Memories of the air are entirely different from impressions formed on other journeys. You may study a vast and distant landscape, the aerodrome waiting-rooms and messes; but only here and there will you make contact with the life of a country. Indeed, when almost every pause for refreshment is made in a different territory, you will find yourself forgetful of frontiers and thinking only of the African continent. Those who have flown over this route, however, will remember the grey Limpopo, for there they said farewell to the Union. Then the strip roads of Rhodesia, tea at Bulawayo, cold meat at Lusaka, the remote Bangweolo swamps from which any monster might emerge, and at the end of the day's run, Kasama. It

is all a little confused; until you settle down with a "sundowner" in a tropical African setting romantic enough for Gertrude Page.

Kasama, the hotel with rondavels, swimming pool and vegetable garden, lived on air traffic. There north-bound and south-bound aircraft often met, their crews and passengers mingled, pounds were exchanged for Egyptian piastres. All were happy – some because they were going to the war, others because they had been to war and were now homeward bound. It was pleasant to discover a place in which everyone was satisfied.

The pilots sit apart in deep conferences on the handling and navigation of Lodestars. Captains of aircraft on the "shuttle service" are usually older than operational pilots. Each job in the air calls for a special

temperament. Lodestar captains seem to be serious and mature young men of thirty. They cling to tomato juice and technical conversation.

“You learn the route, you learn the weather, you learn Africa,” one of the Lodestar captains told me that night. Old commercial pilots had trained him for this responsibility. Night flying, instrument flying, emergency flying, single-engine take-offs, landing on short aerodromes, lecture after lecture on weather. Then 500 hours as second pilot before taking charge.

Between Pretoria and Cairo there are four distinct zones of weather. Somewhere the Lodestar captain will probably encounter haze from bush fires, obscuring all landmarks, or low cloud, or the dust that hangs in the air like a grey curtain, the colour of the desert. In a raging dust storm he will

remain on the ground, regardless of schedule. Men who have flown through Sudan dust storms remember the experience as a nightmare.

“You have to build up a picture in your head of all the landmarks of a strip of Africa from 50 to 100 miles wide,” explained the Lodestar captain. “At last the whole route becomes as familiar as the sight of Table Mountain. Over the deserts of the Sudan and Egypt, where there are strong cross-winds and few landmarks, you cling to the Nile for guidance.”

You must emerge from your mosquito net long before the dawn when you take all Africa in your stride. Then comes another stretch of the great panorama. Waterless bush, smoke, a glimpse of the alluvial gold country with Lake Rukwa below the port wing, and empty wilderness again until the

koppie at Dodoma aerodrome appears in sight.

Desert again, almost to Nairobi, with a glimpse of the Kilimanjaro snows and wild beasts seen through breaks in the clouds to vary the monotony. Around Nairobi the traveller looks down on one of the most impressive landscapes of the whole run. This green coffee country is reminiscent of the Pietermaritzburg-Durban hills, and here are the famous lakes to stir the imagination. Here grim Africa relents for a space and one sees land where the struggle to survive becomes easier. Here is one of those stretches which must make every air passenger long to return to the slow "safari" and learn more of the wonderful below.

The Lodestars climb above the "bumps," they find the most comfortable level and stay there,

sailing up and down Africa almost without a tremor. It was strange to watch the ice forming on the winds, crossing the equator at 18,000 feet. Three degrees below zero outside, but snug enough with the warmers at work in the cabin. Among the main sensations of this journey are the sudden changes of temperature. The air is more pleasant than the "deck."

When you land at the desperate Sudan outpost of Juba, the heat closes round you mercilessly and there is no way out. Juba marks the end of the White Nile navigation. Before dinner that night I stood beside the swift river and watched the busy decks of high-piled steamers that had come all the way from Khartoum. I remembered river journeys in the Congo and Burma – probably the most pleasurable of all ways of travel – and wished that I

could linger for a time in the green world of swamp and water that lies round Juba. There are giants in this remote territory, the thin legged Dinkas. Vast herds of elephant, too, but the Lodestars will not wait.

“Thank heaven that night of agony is over,” exclaimed my room companion as he threw off his suffocating mosquito net. On to Khartoum, a cup of tea and tomato sandwich, aircraft in the hangars with that shabby appearance given by desert conditions, another swirl of dust and a parting glimpse of the joining of the White Nile with the Blue.

You have never seen a desert until you have flown, hour after hour, above that terrifying expanse between Khartoum and Wadi Halfa. The life-giving river is far away, and from aloft it seems that the scorched land would not

nourish the smallest animal. It was at this stage of the flight that the calm routine was upset, so that the steady time-table service became an adventure. A fuse blew, and the wireless operator strolled back into the cabin looking for a screw-driver. The radio direction-finder was out of action. All efforts to repair it in mid-air failed, and the pilots flew on by compass.

It was their intention to strike the Nile to the south of Wadi Halfa and then follow the river to the aerodrome. Unfortunately the dead reckoning was wrong, too. We found the Nile and flew low, searching the banks for Wadi and seeing only long stretches of desolate river ahead. I wondered sadly what my friends, the experts at the air navigation school, would have had to say about this effort. It was the

captain's first flight in command of a Lodestar on the Pretoria-Cairo run. I felt sorry for him, and before long I was feeling sorry for myself. The second pilot had only just gained his wings, and had never been over the route before. The passengers observed a deep consultation in progress between the pilots, engineer and wireless operator.

Then, before our astonished eyes, there appeared one of the world's great engineering achievements – the dam two thousand yards in length which links the islets of the First Cataract at Assouan. I was following the course of the flight with the aid of an old Imperial Airways map, which gave photographs of such scenes; and the pilot sent for my map to confirm his own theory. Assouan was not on the normal route. He had never been

there before, and he wanted to make sure he was right.

Our next vision was that of a small aerodrome, set in a bowl of sinister hills, with a wicked approach through a narrow gorge. It was an emergency landing ground rather than an aerodrome, far too small for a Lodestar's comfort. But there was nothing else for it – fuel was running low. The pilot came in low and jammed on his brakes. Safely down. What next?

Next we were informed that every anti-aircraft gun round Assouan had been trained on us as we circled the town, for they were not accustomed to strange, large birds like the Lodestar in that neighbourhood. Furthermore, the chap who had the key of the petrol store was down to the town and would have to be located. It was getting late

in the afternoon. The pilots kept pacing off the distance, no doubt discussing the prospects of a successful take-off.

Wadi Halfa would meanwhile report us as overdue. There was no way of telling Wadi that we had landed at Assouan. The pilot had decided to turn back to Wadi Halfa as soon as possible to allay the anxiety.

The man with the key arrived, and having taken a minimum load of fuel to ease the take-off, the uneasy passengers returned to their seats. The old "ace" removed his spectacles as we taxied out to the far end of the landing ground and braced his feet against the seat in front of him. The fighter-pilot was similarly prepared. All too close ahead of us lay a railway siding, with its hard trucks and buildings. The pilot held his brakes,

the flaps came out, engines raced and the Lodestar bounced forward. She was airborne, just airborne, when the pilot yanked her over that railway siding.

Only one hazard remained. We had to make Wadi Halfa before sunset, for in those latitudes there is no twilight. A blood red and bullying sun drops sharply over the hills. Night falls as though an electric switch has been snapped off.

The Lodestar roared over the date palms and water-wheels, the mud houses and narrow patches of irrigation at Wadi. Our wheels touched, and it was night. A long and tense day's flying, that one. I can remember no evening in my life when the whisky was more welcome.

Earlier than ever the Lodestar sped across the magnificent natural aerodrome. “George,” the automatic pilot, took charge again on the last hop to Cairo. Somewhere south of Cairo the rabbi opened his eyes, looked down cautiously, and remarked to me: “Ah, we are getting somewhere at last – I can see a nice tarred road.” I followed his gaze, and saw the dark ribbon of the Nile.

The rabbi became hardened to air travel after the first day, but always showed signs of displeasure when the Lodestar banked and circled an aerodrome before landing. Once he turned to me and complained: “I am all right ... and he makes me giddy again!”

Not until the Nile delta is reached is it possible to understand how Egypt’s millions live. Then the aching yellow

waste is transformed to luxuriant shades of green. It was like the irrigation settlements I had seen along the Orange River in South Africa, but on a mammoth scale.

The tumble-down step pyramids of Sakkara and the sleek pyramids of Giza, the world’s most obvious aids to navigation, slipped past on the port side. Over Heliopolis, the “City of the Sun,” circled the Lodestar. Just before arrival the scene was like a page from the “Arabian Nights” – towers and minarets, carved balconies and cool gardens rushing up as the aircraft glided in to the last landing. Once again I had worked a point. I drove to the Continental-Savoy Hotel feeling twenty years younger.

CHAPTER 16

MIDDLE EAST

I CAME to know the Continental-Savoy Hotel in Cairo better than any other hotel in the world. During my first five months in the Middle East I was a “base wallah,” one of the many sleek and unruffled officers who spent leisurely afternoons at Gezira and dined with dignity at the Turf Club.

From the Continental terrace I watched the endless cavalcade of uniforms and desert – dusty trucks that flowed through Cairo like a tide. I had my room and bath, and if there were flaws in the wartime cuisine, I grumbled. It was a dramatic atmosphere, especially for those who were able to glance behind the scenes. Espionage flourished in neutral Egypt. No one will ever tell the whole story of the Continental-Savoy Hotel in

wartime; but I know that walls had ears in that great brown building, and there were unpleasant surprises for the unwary.

South African Air Force headquarters at the time of my arrival occupied two floors in a shabby block of flats in Sharia Madrab el Nishab, just outside the barbed wire surrounding R.A.F. headquarters. There Gilfillan welcomed me and promptly made me his assistant. The personnel section dealt with all the human problems of the squadrons in the field. Gilfillan had a sympathetic touch which coincided with my own views. We tried, within the stern limits of the military system, to fit men into the right jobs and post them where they wanted to go.

In theory it was possible to telephone the squadrons in the desert, and I

remembered the thrill with which I first attempted the intricate and ambitious procedure – Middle East, Middle East Trunks, Western Army Advanced, Air Headquarters, and finally the squadron. If all those exchanges worked smoothly, a faint voice would answer at last – too faint to be intelligible. On certain days of the week we had to wear our gas-masks while we worked, and then no one could hear us when they ‘phoned. Gilfillan devised a method of smoking a cigarette through a gas-mask which was typical of his ingenuity.

High up in the Royal Air Force some great mind, which had never studied fatigue in industry, laid down hours of duty, and we followed them. The day began at eight, we went off to lunch at one and enjoyed the Egyptian siesta until a quarter to five in the afternoon.

The evening session lasted until eight-fifteen – often later, for the “base wallah” is not always a lazy parasite. But the fault in the system lay in the fact that there was no day of rest. Sometimes we could take an afternoon off, never a whole day.

As a result of over-work, I think, nearly everyone suffered from that strange condition known as “Gippy Memory.” In mild cases, one put down a packet of cigarettes and forgot to pick it up again. Often it amounted to complete mental amnesia. One had to make a note of everything, or it vanished from the mind as though it had never existed.

“Gippy tummy” was a more serious local malady, and it could not be avoided. I often wondered what unsuspecting peace-time tourists must have thought when they were forced to

spend their time, not among the antiquities but in the lavatories. One bout I had, after a plate of strawberries and cream, became so serious that the medical officer tried to send me to hospital. He gave me the cure – brandy to produce a state of defiance, then castor oil and starvation.

There was a flight-sergeant named Kelly at headquarters, and one day he reported sick with “Gippy tummy.”

“I’ve been twenty-seven times today,” he told the medical officer, expecting sympathy.

“Twenty-seven ... well that’s about normal for this part of the world,” barked the M.O.

During one of my attacks I noticed the electric globe in my bathroom swinging wildly, and I nearly fell off the seat. I thought at the time that I

was fainting, but when the newspapers arrived I was reassured. Cairo had been rocked by a mild earthquake.

Cairo provided some of the most criminal examples of careless talk of the whole of the Second Great War. Security officers lurked in every bar, hoping to catch someone in the act; but I believe the enemy knew our every move in advance. On one occasion a Cairo waste-paper dealer was found in possession of large quantities of secret documents and maps. He was able to prove that they had been sold to him by an army salvage unit! On another occasion the same dealer received two mail bags full of letters sent to him in error by an army post office.

Nevertheless, the British intelligence service was alert-in this war, as in the last, it was probably the most efficient

department of the whole army. Late one night I was going to my room in the Continental when I noticed an officer escorting a famous cabaret dancer into his room. He was a very senior officer, and at that moment an unworthy suspicion entered my mind. A few days later, however, all Cairo heard a weird story. Two German officers wearing British uniform had been arrested at the Continental. They had £20,000 Egyptian (printed in Germany) in their possession. The dancer, with several good-looking assistants, had secured a house-boat on the Nile where the standard of oriental entertainment left nothing to be desired. Information received from the guests was passed on to the Germans. The officer I had seen in the corridor had discovered the spies, chosen the

right moment, and rounded up the whole gang in one sweep.

In November a draft of about 350 men was due to arrive at Suez from South Africa, and I was sent with another officer to conduct them to their squadrons in the desert. It was one of those experiences which are tolerable only in retrospect. Instead of my room and bath at the Continental I found myself in the grim transit camp in Suez. The weather by now was cold enough for battle-dress. We had to draw blankets, battle-dress, gas-masks, tin hats and other items of equipment for the draft. The men arrived. They had been sleeping on spring mattresses in a great liner, and though South Africans are tough they did not relish the sudden change to the hard ground of the desert camp. Among them was a stowaway who had not been

discovered until the troopship was at sea.

A draft is not like a squadron – it lacks the discipline which is found among men who have worked together under strenuous conditions on active service. They were confined to camp in their own interests, for the back streets of Suez form a dangerous introduction to the evil land of Egypt. However, at least half of them found their way down the town that night; and in the morning we had to rescue some of them from the military lock-up.

One man was reported to me to be a lunatic. I had a look at him, and could make nothing of his conversation; so I sent him down to Cairo. A reproachful minute was written to Pretoria, more in sorrow than in anger, suggesting that lunatics should not be sent to the Middle East in future. Pretoria

demanded a medical certificate. Imagine our surprise when the specialist pronounced the man to be sane! He had a cleft palate which caused the defect in his speech. A nasty situation was saved when another medical officer discovered that the man was suffering from some rare condition which made it impossible for him to serve in the field.

The whole draft had to be inoculated against tetanus. We drew rations for 350 men for seven days from one of those enormous open-air desert dumps. Next day we got the draft down to Tewfik railway station in good time and the men filled a number of uncomfortable wooden, third-class compartments. Two coaches were needed to carry the rations, tents, and the tool-kits that the air mechanics had

brought with them. The train drew into Pont Limoun station, Cairo, at eight that night. All the tons of kit had to be carried through the black-out to Cairo Main Station, a couple of hundred yards away. Boxes of rations broke open and tins of bully beef were snatched and stolen by the station loafers. Men of the draft vanished into the night, to return hours later, pleasantly jingled and telling of their conquests in the cabarets. The N.C.O.'s, wearing their new battle-dress, had cunningly forgotten to add their stripes, so that I did not know which way to turn for support. The sergeant-major wrung his hands. We knew that the Western Desert train left shortly after midnight, but we did not know whether our draft would be on board.

In the midst of this chaos a dispatch-rider from headquarters arrived with a note for me from Gilfillan, enclosing a signal from the Union. I kept it as a souvenir. Here it is, with the names altered :

“Miss Smith of Johannesburg has been certified pregnant, five months. She claims that Air Mechanic Jones is responsible. He is in the draft. Does he admit responsibility and, if so, do circumstances permit of his return to marry her, if he is prepared to do so?”

I sent for Jones, took him aside, and told him the bad news about Miss Smith.

“I saw her the night before I left, sir, and she was quite all right.”

“This is not really a military matter,” I pointed out persuasively. “But if you admit it, the air force will send you

back to marry her. Now then – were you responsible?”

“Yes, sir,” was the unexpected reply.

Jones went back to the Union by air. The South African Air Force always dealt gently with “compassionate” cases. One of the most unusual requests that came before me was made by a man whose brother had been charged with murder. He flew back home to give evidence.

Meanwhile a late roll-call on Cairo Main Station mercifully showed that all the sightseers had returned from the night haunts. I boarded the desert train thinking wistfully of the dinner I had missed at the Continental. At six in the morning I looked out of the window on to Amiriya station. The men of an English regiment, all shaved and smart, were filing past a military

buffet where coffee and bully beef were being served. Our draft followed, with not quite the same neatness and precision.

But the week of strain was ending. El Daba was our destination, and there the two coaches of rations and tool-kits were unloaded. I noticed a stir among the men at work, and found them staring at a rough notice reading: “Beware – Unexploded Bomb.” It was their first glimpse of the war. There was another that night, when the unlucky Fuka aerodromes were raided. But now my job was done. I drank thankfully in the first desert mess I had seen, with nude portraits in the bar, the scoreboard which kept tally of pilots and their victories, the widely-dispersed tents and trailers dug in below the surface.

A squadron truck carried me into Alexandria next day, over the coast road I came to know only too well. Lunch at the Cecil, and I drove into the naval dockyard and visited old sailing friends serving in the South African anti-submarine trawlers. They were on the Tobruk run at that time, and they said that if they survived they would want no more seafaring for the rest of their lives. I caught the fast train back to Cairo that night.

In Cairo I remained until the following April. As the weather became colder Gilfillan and I bought fuel for the fireplace in our office, slabs of compressed cotton seed mixed with camel dung. There is no natural fuel in Egypt. People in luxurious flats cook on oil-pressure stoves. Our expanding headquarters were moved to an old-fashioned building in Sharwabi Pasha,

known as Villa Victoria. The popular story was that “Villa Vic” had been a brothel, but in an old Baedeker I found it listed as an hotel.

Every morning a barrel-organ, with tambourine accompaniment, played selections from “Me and My Gal.” Every morning a woman in the basement called shrilly to an unseen man – “Hassan! Hassan!” There was a winery next door, and we lived in the rich aroma of Cyprus and Palestine vintages. The scarred and sinister cats of Egypt, with small heads and vicious habits, prowled about our windows. Only a few feet away we looked into a block of flats, where the tenants lived their uncurtained lives regardless of the South African Air Force. According to an old Cairo custom, all refuse was thrown out of the windows; and many a rotten tomato dropped on

to the desks of startled administrative officers. There was a N.A.A.F.I. bar on the premises, and late in the evening we were allowed to order drinks. That was also an Egyptian custom. Gilfillan had drawn my attention to yet another peculiarity. "This is the only country I know," he said, "where you clap for the lift."

The local newspaper provided more sidelights on the crazy city in which we lived. The story I liked best described a gang of men who entered a block of flats, switched off the electric current, dismantled the lift cables, took the cars apart, loaded all this equipment on trucks and drove away, never to re-appear. On another day we learnt that the Great Pyramid of Giza had caught fire. Then there was a band of criminals who trained monkeys to do

their work for them, and made rich hauls.

Captain Roy Allen, the equipment officer, and Lieutenant Jock Waldron, known as "the undertaker" because he dealt with casualties, shared a room in a street near headquarters. There were three burglaries within a week, while they slept, and Roy lost his pay book and almost everything he possessed. The Swiss landlord bought a fierce watchdog. Roy Allen, returning home late one night, was bitten by the dog, and complained.

"What did you say to the dog?" inquired the landlord.

Roy told him. He had used a vigorous English phrase.

"Ah no, that is no good," explained the landlord. "You see, this dog only speaks French."

About this time Roy Allen received a signal from the Union asking for an estimate of the cost of equipment to the South African Air Force in the Middle East to date. He sent a reply pointing out the difficulty of arriving at an accurate total. Back came another signal: "Accurate total not essential. Give it to the nearest million pounds."

Many old friends called on me. I had been at school with a lad named Caspareuthus-always known as "Casper." Now he was Captain R. F. Caspareuthus of Imperial Airways, with 14,000 hours flying in his logbooks. He had certainly spent more hours in the air than any other South African, and if there are men who have flown longer you could count them on the fingers of one hand. Carel Birkby, companion on many South

African journeys, author of several good books; energetic Carel with his curly hair and insatiable thirst for new experience, was there as a war correspondent. Neville Clayton, in my opinion the best photographer in South Africa, had come up to do cinema work. We had been out on news stories together. When I got back to the Continental at night there was Bill Hassoldt Davis, the American writer, wearing Free French uniform – the brilliant kepi of the Spahis. I had met Bill Davis in South Africa shortly after the outbreak of war. He was a wanderer over the face of the earth, with the Explorer's Club, New York, as his only permanent address. But once he had lived in Tahiti for three years, writing stories of the island and a novel. With these and other friends the nights of Cairo passed all too

quickly, and my only problem was that of arriving on duty at eight o'clock in the morning.

One of the most difficult war problems dealt with at headquarters was that of pilots whose nerve failed them while flying on operations. After a sufficiently long period at the front any pilot, however brave, however skilful, must crack under the strain. But how long? And was a fighter pilot subjected to more strain than a bomber pilot? The R.A.F. medical specialists professed to be able to distinguish between cowardice in the face of the enemy and genuine "operational fatigue." I do not know the answer to this problem, but I was always both sorry and embarrassed when one of these unfortunates slunk into my office for the papers that would send him back to South Africa in disgrace. It is a

fact that such men, when transferred to tank units at the front, displayed great courage. In the Royal Air Force pilots who broke down in this way were often reduced to the ranks. Our volunteer air force sent them back to civil life. I heard that many re-joined, but with what results I do not know.

As a contrast I remember a Jew with the three ribbons of the last war and a face like Popeye the Sailor man. He was 52 years old, but he had an "army age" of 47. As soon as the first S.A.A.F. squadrons were sent to Abyssinia, this man went on active service again. Owing to his age, he was made an orderly-room clerk. He used to wander about the bush in Abyssinia, armed to the teeth, looking for Italians; and he managed to find prisoners. He came on to the Middle East, and served for some time in the

Western Desert. A kindly medical officer, trying to do a good turn, arranged that our friend should be transferred to headquarters. But this middle-aged Jew chafed and fretted and applied again and again to be sent back to the desert. During a short period when I was in charge of the section he pleaded with me.

“I’ve never had a sick report against me, sir. I came up here to see the thing through – I want to be back in the desert with the boys.” There were tears in his eyes. I found him a post and got him away before any objection could be raised.

From my critical arm-chair on the Continental terrace I saw a great deal of wartime life in Cairo. I disapproved strongly of a British brigadier who stood on the steps shouting to passing, desert weary soldiers on leave to

button up the collars of their battle-dress. I enjoyed the pranks of the Australians. Like their fathers in the last war, they had a reputation for riotous behaviour; but one of their officers showed me the other side of the picture. If they broke up a shop it was because they had been robbed there. They set fire to the Cairo red light district during the last war because an Australian soldier had been murdered in the quarter.

Often a gharry would pass the Continental amid shouts and screams. The driver would be an Australian soldier wearing the red fez of the Egyptian driver, while the Egyptian wore a slouch hat. The gharry would be crowded with Australians singing their famous “Aye yi yippy ippy yi.” Over the back of the gharry would lean two hard-faced diggers – one with

a handful of piastres, the other with a whip. One would throw coins to the street urchins pursuing the gharry like wolves; the other wielding the long whip expertly. Hence the howls as the ludicrous procession passed the Continental.

This period of soft living and hard work at headquarters came to an end in April 1942. I was then appointed Press Officer for the South African Air Force, and no longer groped nervously in the dark performing duties for which I had received no training. By this time I had become the senior lieutenant in the administrative branch, but I had never agitated for promotion as I felt that I might find myself in even greater difficulties. The new post carried the rank of captain, and when I was given ten days' leave as well I felt that I had been generously treated.

Ten refreshing days in Palestine and Syria followed. It is possible to have too much of the unwashed streets of Cairo, and the Palestine cities were like glimpses of Europe. I found romance on the old roads along the Crusader's coast, and on the snows of the Lebanon. Jerusalem was too grim for me. In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the most sacred place in Christendom, rival religions had staked their claims and were guarding their boundaries jealously. I went down to the coast again with the baking "khamseen" wind blowing, and stayed on the pleasant Tel-Aviv waterfront.

A new life opened up for me on my return. Wherever the South African Air Force squadrons were operating I was welcome; and so I came to know

the theatre of war from Port Said westwards to Tobruk. I lived with brave men and tried in my messages to South Africa to reflect their great effort. At this time, unfortunately for me, the Royal Air Force authorities decided that the Dominion squadrons were receiving too much publicity. The policy of holding a careful balance, so that the achievements of the Royal Air Force were fully recognised, was fair enough; but the policy was misinterpreted and some of the results were lamentable. For example, about half the air operations by day in the Western Desert were being carried out by South African Air Force squadrons at that time. The famous Boston light bombers were all ours; they were escorted almost entirely by S.A.A.F. fighters; and there were also S.A.A.F. tactical

reconnaissance, photographic and coastal squadrons in the field.

The men of this formidable force would sit round their wireless set in the evening listening with astonishment to the B.B.C. giving the credit for their raids to the Royal Air Force. Even in Press photographs, members of the South African Air Force were often described as R.A.F. pilots. A deplorable business, bad for morale, hopeless from the point of view of maintaining good relations between Britain and the Dominions. I felt much too small, with my three pips, to fight this battle for the proper recognition of a service which was striking heavy blows in every Western Desert battle. My senior officers took the matter up, however, and my "copy" was no longer mutilated. The South African newspapers were told

what the South African Air Force was doing. I do not think that people in England ever realised the vital part played by the South African squadrons during the critical days of the retreat to Alamein.

I think I have already made it clear that I have a high regard for comfort and exquisite meals. It came as a happy surprise when I found anything of the kind in the Western Desert. There was one spot, known to all the war correspondents as an oasis in a desert of bully beef. This place was the Public Relations camp at Ma'aten Bagush. It was in charge of a handsome, fair-haired squadron leader, and all the conventions were observed. There were flowers on the dinner table (collected by the mess corporal amid the jeers of passing truck drivers), menus were typewritten, wine was

served and the catering was of a high order. One night, I remember, they made crepes suzettes at dinner, pouring in a rich mixture of liqueurs.

I recall the consternation in this mess one evening when a desert-stained officer walked in and announced: "You know, I've just discovered that there are foxes in this desert – I bowled one over with my revolver. I'm going to have the thing stuffed to prove it."

"I say ... what bad form!" protested one of the imperial officers present. "Sort of thing one gets kicked out of one's remaining clubs for, what?"

"That's nothing," replied the unrepentant sportsman. "We spotted some gazelle the other day and turned our machine-guns on them. Very tasty after bully, that meat was."

I was always a little self-conscious when I wore shorts in that mess. They used to change into slacks for dinner.

The camp was set behind a line of sand-dunes, and the beach was exactly like the sandy curve outside my little cottage on the shores of Table Bay. Many an hour I spent swimming and sunbathing with hundreds of other nudes on the beach at Bagush. I never found life in the Western Desert entirely grim in summer when the blue Mediterranean was close at hand. It was usually peaceful enough in the Bagush camp, though I remember a morning when the squadron leader, drinking his orange juice in bed, called out to me: "I say, did you hear those nasty bullets during the night?" A lone Jerry, returning to Crete after a raid, had fired a burst as he flew low over our tents. He missed the inn sign

specially painted for the camp by Cecil Beaton, the London photographer.

In May, just before one of the well-advertised battles, I cadged a lift to the front with a fellow journalist, then an air liaison intelligence officer. Transport was my insoluble problem. I was left to fend for myself, and I hitch-hiked successfully all over the Western Desert. We set off from Bagush that morning, and spent the night in a shattered villa at the top of Sollum Pass. The remnant of an English regiment occupied the rest of the villa – survivors of some bloody skirmish before the battle.

Now I have a confession to make which should have come much earlier in this work. For me, the day starts well only when a cup of tea is brought to my bedside. It is a weakness, and I

admit it. Drinking that tea, I feel that I am not forgotten. A sense of well-being follows, I am able to think profoundly and plan my day cleverly. The tea is an inspiration, and it means far more to me than breakfast. (Not that I sneer at a grapefruit, eggs, bacon and coffee; but the tea is the great thing.) When a new war breaks out, or a friend invites me on a shooting expedition into the Kalahari, I say "yes," but I ponder just for a moment and I think: "There goes my early morning tea." A sad moment, my friends, but it passes. I thought of calling this book "Early Morning Tea," for it plays a large part in my life.

That night in the villa at Sollum I said to myself: "No early morning tea." I felt a little heroic, as I always do when the tea is missing. There was heavy

bombing of the pass during the night, but I remained in my sleeping-bag, thinking of the terrors of a tea-less morning rather than of explosions in the night.

At daybreak the intelligence officer remarked: "You snored like hell, Laurie, but there was a chap at the other end of the building who had you licked." I was too depressed to reply. At that moment the miracle occurred. An English soldier, speaking with the accent of a county which I ought to be able to identify but cannot, put his head around the gap where the door had been. "Would ye like a coop o' tay?" he inquired.

"Aye, lad," said I, and held out my mug gratefully.

It never happened again, but it is something to be able to remember the

most welcome cup of tea one has ever had.

Next day I reached Baheira, on the escarpment near Gambut, where several of the South African Air Force squadrons were situated. The water was so foul that not even whisky disguised it. One evening there was a sandstorm so weird that it reminded me of the total eclipse. A philosopher in the mess remarked: "Well, we have one pleasure in life left to us – alcohol." But the sand was in that, too.

I begged for lifts between the squadrons, and worked under difficulties. Then one day appeared Brian Lello, the South African war correspondent with a truck. Brian suggested that I should move over to the South African war correspondents' camp at Gambut and share his transport, and I accepted gladly. Captain Arthur Bell

(chief sub-editor of my own newspaper before the war) was in charge of this camp. I had no more transport trouble. Sometimes I travelled with Geoffrey Long, the war artist, whose canvas of Tobruk looked to me like the work of a genius. Long was a frail young man with a weak chest; but he had enormous courage and went off on bombing raids just for the hell of it. The camp had been pitched in a Senussi wheatfield, and the Arabs brought us eggs daily in exchange for tea.

One day Lello went off to inspect the Tobruk defences, then manned largely by South Africans. It was no part of my business to study land warfare, but I went with him. Luckily I found a South African Air Force army co-operation squadron on the bomb pitted Tobruk aerodrome, and collected a



The author surveys the shattered centre of Tobruk. He is standing in the “municipal gardens” outside the town hall.

good story. I had been in Tobruk before; but then, though often raided, it was well behind the lines. Now Gazala had been evacuated, and Tobruk was at the front. I know

nothing of desert warfare apart from a few general principles which I learnt by listening to experienced men in the desert. Yet instinct told me that all was not well at Tobruk. I did not see

enough guns. Anti-aircraft guns – yes, an Italian Macchi came over strafing and forced us to take cover behind a granite monument; and we saw the pilot bale out, too late, and the aircraft hit the ground. But the guns that would stop a German tank attack I did not see.

“We are going to lose this battle,” I said to Bell and the correspondents that evening. I had a deep fear of becoming a prisoner of war. (No early morning tea.) Next day the Senussi arrived and reaped their miserable crop of wheat, long before harvesting time. There was a field telephone in Bell’s tent, and one could overhear conversations. That morning Bell returned from Battle Headquarters and asked me to keep a continuous watch on the telephone. In due course I heard Richard Dimpleby of the B.B.C.

talking to one of General Ritchie’s staff officers.

“Any news?” inquired fat Dimpleby.

“Well ... yes. Something happened in the night. We sent our armour against their armour, and we ran into their guns. We’ve lost a lot of tanks.

“Shall I say the position is critical?”

“Well ... it is critical, but I don’t know whether Cairo will let you use the word. We’re pulling out after lunch.”

I waited for no more. “Bell,” I said, “they’re pulling out after lunch. Let us pull out before lunch.” It is the only occasion I can remember on which I gladly sacrificed a meal.

Bell agreed. Moreover, he promised that he would put the field telephone down on my desk in the newspaper office at the end of the war as a

souvenir of the conversation I had overheard. He would have kept his promise, I know, but he was killed in the Lodestar which crashed at Kisumu with the beloved Major-General Dan Pienaar on board.

All the traffic in the world seemed to be rushing down the road when I drove Geoffrey Long eastwards towards Sollum that day. There was a ghastly jam on an S-bend near Capuzzo, and if the Germans had used their aircraft there would have been a massacre. British military police sorted it out. These men were magnificent. I have dodged the red-caps in my time, but that day I gave thanks for their kind guidance and their discipline. I was making for Kilo 111 at Bug-Bug but I missed Bell. Long and I slept beside our truck that night. We had most of the rations with

us, and the others were peevish and hungry when we found them next day.

I am easily baffled by diagrams of battles, and so I am not attempting to describe what happened during those disastrous weeks in June. After a month in the desert I flew back to Cairo in a Bombay troop carrier to collect my thoughts and write some magazine articles which had been ordered. I set out for the desert again on June 27, and spent a night in Alexandria. The following day was a Sunday, and the sensible people of Alexandria were on their beaches according to custom, lounging under beach umbrellas with their girls, loafing on rafts, or floating in milk-warm bays. That is life as I understand it, and although I am not by nature envious I thought bitterly about war as I left them to their pleasures and drove

grimly into the wastes of sand-dunes and fig-trees towards El Daba. Perhaps they would not have relaxed so happily if they had known that very soon the enemy would be within sixty miles of their city.

I must have left my wits behind me along the Alexandria waterfront, or I would have noticed that all the traffic was thundering past me in the opposite direction. Field bakeries, road gangs, all the “soft skinned” vehicles that must clear out first in a retreat. Still deep in thought, I had almost reached El Daba when I stopped and asked an officer for information.

“I am looking for Number Three South African Air Force Bomber Wing,” I explained. “They are somewhere at El Daba.”

“They are not,” replied the officer. “Let me see your identity card please. Okay ... all air force units have moved right back and the Jerries will be entering El Daba at any moment now.”

I turned the car round and thanked God that I knew how to drive through heavy sand. Now I saw three endless parallel lines of traffic moving eastward along desert tracks – the main road was not wide enough to carry the army in retreat. On the tarred main road the vehicles were crawling bumper to bumper. I left it and ploughed through the sand, wishing that I was back in the Kalahari.

There was a South African Air Force base depot on the Alexandria-Cairo road, not far south of Amiriya, and I made for this place in the hope of hearing news of the Bomber Wing. When I arrived that evening the last of

the base depot personnel were clearing out, and the Wing moved in. I thought it was a startling transformation – from base depot to advanced operational headquarters within a few hours. The Bostons were out pounding the advancing enemy; and it was stated later that their concentrated effort delayed Rommel to an extent which enabled the El Alamein line to be formed.

In the field everyone was calm and cheerful, though the position was indeed desperate. About the middle of July, however, I had to return to Cairo to make a broadcast recording; and Cairo had the atmosphere of a doomed city. “All the girls have gone,” I was told at S.A.A.F. headquarters. Our W.A.A.F.’s and hundreds of other women have been sent by train to Assouan, and river steamers were

standing by to carry them to Khartoum. Secret papers were being fed into furnaces. At G.H.Q. and R.A.F. Headquarters the ashes filled the air. There were other ominous signs, too, and my old fear of becoming a prisoner of war returned. I shall never forget the faces in the streets and the silent groups in the Continental hall. The newspapers were printing nothing to cause alarm, but everyone knew that the enemy was at the gates and the suspense was almost intolerable.

The situation soon became more stable, however, and then a great hush fell over Alamein while both sides built up their forces for the next move. With the war so close at hand my task was simplified. I could do my rounds of the squadrons within a few days and return to my room and bath.

At the end of July I heard that the South African Air Force photographic squadron had gone to Beirut to make a survey of the Syrian and Palestine coasts and Cyprus. This was one of the opportunities I was always seeking. On the night of July 29 the Heliopolis aerodrome was raided, and five determined German pilots created havoc among the hangars. I was out there next morning, waiting to take off for Beirut in a Maryland, when an enemy “recce” came over to photograph the damage. We could just see the vapour trail, everything opened up, and our departure was delayed.

“You’ve got the best kite in the squadron,” remarked one of the air mechanics as he helped me into parachute harness. The pride these men showed in their own machines was encouraging – especially as there

was a long flight over the sea to be made. The Maryland was loaded with mail for the men of the road column which had gone on three days before. Cartons of canned beer, mosquito nets, camp kit – there was barely room in the back for three men. The rear gunner sat above me, while I sat on the wireless operator’s lap. Lieutenant Pat Polson was the pilot, and with two more Marylands to keep us company we steered northwards to the Canal.

Yellow desert, mauve river, the brilliant green patchwork of the delta – it was cooler now and the ancient land made a rich picture. Mud roads and purple-brown soil, white minarets and squat villages under clumps of palm. Ismailia passed in the square of the bottom hatch which, for the two and a half hours of the flight, gave me my view of the world. There were white

steam yachts at anchor, and green parks, with signs of war if you looked for them. Then the grim Sinai desert, of dunes and heat. The tarred road that winds across it is the only sign of man.

Down at the coast, however, the scene is more cheerful. Lagoons, camels, boats and fishermen vary the desolation of the dunes. I stood up beside the rear gunner as we raced over the surf almost level with the long beaches. The tang of the sea surrounded us, and mingled with the aircraft smell.

To the North of Gaza the first farms of Palestine appear. The desert ends abruptly, cultivation begins; and it seems a daring enterprise to till the earth so close to the menacing dunes. But the three roaring Marylands give time only for split-second reflections. The journey which lasted so many

hours when I travelled up here on leave a few months before – this weary rail journey had become a short jaunt. At 200 miles an hour the Marylands took the Palestine coast in their stride. They flew along the world's oldest highway, northwards past the Biblical towers and walls of Jaffa, over the gay seafront cafes of Tel-Aviv.

The last lap now, past the frontier station where they halted my car when I came this way by road; past Tyre and Sidon to the green mountains of Lebanon and the pleasant city of Beirut.

Beirut, with its terraces of vines and banana groves and mountains of cedars, its red-tiled villas and cliffs, offers a grand panorama to the desert-weary airman. The squadron camped at the edge of the aerodrome.

Photographic trailers, with all the dark-room equipment, were ready for work. One of the Marylands was assigned to the first flight-to Cyprus, the island everyone was anxious to see.

Major O. Glynn Davies, D.F.C., the squadron commander, flew the first South African Air Force aircraft ever to land in Cyprus. This time Mae Wests were worn under the parachute harness. A rubber dinghy was put on board, the wireless set was tested carefully, and we were ready for an hour over the ocean. Airborne at 0915 hours, the Maryland left the mainland boldly to the reassuring tune of her twin engines.

It was not a long ocean flight, after all – certainly a mere incident to the pilot, who flew air liners before the war and had spent a great deal of time over the

water since the war started. He took part in the Watussi affair, far to the south of Cape Point; the interception of the Vichy convoy; and he had crossed by air from East Africa to Madagascar. He was in Abyssinia with the bombers. I looked down on the empty ocean 5,000 feet below, and knew that everything would be all right.

“Land on the starboard side,” announced the wireless operator. I twisted my neck to see, framed in the small glass oblong, the bleak hills that reach down to the sea at Larnaca. All of us, I think, had pictured Cyprus as a dream island clothed in trees, one of those earthly paradises where life goes easily in vineyard and orchard. As the ancient home of Venus, too, the island must have promised us a romantic vision. In the spring, they say, Cyprus

is like that. But in the baking heat haze of early August the island looked like the Karroo during a drought. It was hotter than the Western Desert.

The Maryland touched down at 1015 hours on one of the world's finest aerodromes, near the island capital of Nicosia. Hospitable R.A.F. officers drove us away in a car that kept to the left. It was a queer sensation, after many months of driving on the right in Egypt; but that, too, reminded us of home. In Nicosia many of the green gardens were fed by windmills. Those clanking windmills, the vines and the shape and colour of the mountains across the plain reproduced exactly a South African Karroo scene.

I spent the day with my old friend, William J. Makin,¹ author of many books. As a journalist he had worked in South Africa, India, Jamaica, and I had often called on him in Covent Garden when he was editor of "Pearson's Weekly." I thought it was long odds against meeting him in Cyprus, where he held an official post and ran the English daily newspaper; yet here we were in the cool Nicosia club leaning against the bar and discussing the merits of Cyprus brandy.

On the way back to Beirut we were able to study the island again with a little more knowledge. You would not imagine that more than a million acres of this sun-parched soil were

¹ Killed in action in France, August, 1944. He was serving as a war correspondent.

cultivated. There was no sign of the wheat, the mountain torrents or the pine forests that grow on the heights in the north. Oaks and cypresses had lost their leaves. It is easy to form a false impression of a rich island simply by flying over it at the wrong time of the year.

Again the Maryland was alone over the blue expanse where the sun glinted on the waves. But very soon, it seemed, the tricky Beirut aerodrome was below, with its sharp slope towards the sea. The whole squadron watched the landing, and saw the Maryland roll gently to a halt, in the hands of an expert, beside the airport building. All the squadron's pilots had become experts before they left Beirut.

I travelled back from Beirut to Cairo in the perspex-covered nose of a Maryland. Here are new sensations of

flight, no matter how long you have been flying. You are alone in a strange world with the finest possible view – sometimes a stupendous view. This is the observer's seat. He climbs in by means of a ladder, lifts it after him, and closes the bottom hatch. His parachute pack forms the back of his seat. In front of him is the opening of the large aerial camera. Above are the altimeter, air-speed indicator, compass and clock dials. Embedded in his flying helmet is the apparatus with which he talks to the pilot. The circuit includes the wireless operator, who favours everyone on board, at odd moments, with snatches of broadcasting.

On this flight to Cairo we carried an unusual passenger – a Nazi spy. He was an athletic-looking young German wearing a civilian khaki shirt and

shorts, escorted by an R.A.F. officer with revolver. There was a short but serious discussion before the take-off. Should the prisoner be handcuffed or given a parachute? It seemed possible that a Nazi fanatic might attempt sabotage in the air, even at the cost of his own life. A parachute was provided, but there was nothing to worry about. I heard the escort speaking to Pat Polson in the air. He said: "Hello, pilot – the prisoner is sick."

After this welcome interlude I went back to my routine, visiting the squadrons only a few hours away from Cairo. The bomber crews were supplied with "escape outfits" which included neat, khaki-covered packets of Italian paper money. I was in the intelligence tent one day when I saw exposed the most criminal trick I can

imagine. Someone without a conscience at base had stolen the money and substituted toilet paper. I hope they found him, and that he is still serving his sentence.

By now I was becoming a little weary of Egyptian sands, and my stomach was tired of the regular attacks of "Gippy tummy." After thirteen months in the Middle East a relief was appointed, and once again I took my seat in a Lodestar. There was a woman in the second pilot's seat, and some of the passengers looked at her in surprise. I had no qualms, however, as I knew that she had been a professional flying instructor before the war. Moreover, I recognised the first pilot as an old commercial airman, one of the best on the run.

Luxor was the first stop, and while the aircraft was serviced we sauntered

along the pillars of Karnak. The night stop was new to me – a luxurious aerodrome at Wadi Seidna outside Khartoum. I ate Nile perch for dinner.

Nairobi next, and another wartime meeting with another good friend and old sailor-Major George Miller, shipmate on yachting cruises in Cape waters, my companion on many land journeys. He was always seasick, but he never gave up the sea. We dined at Chez Gaby, a true French restaurant in the middle of tropical Africa. The old days lived again in my wine-glass that night, and I felt the heavy burden of my memories.

The following day was Friday, the thirteenth of November, and there were exactly thirteen of us on board the Lodestar. Taking off from Kasama at noon, the aircraft bumped all along the runway in the hot, dead air. She

lifted sluggishly at the extreme end. I looked through the window, and saw alongside me the trees which should have been below. Then we were clear of the ground. The wireless operator burst into the cabin. “We’ve just made it just made it,” he shouted. Friday the thirteenth. Thunder clouds in the Zambezi valley forced the Lodestar down from the smooth levels into an air world of jolts and lurches. At Bulawayo the pilot told us that he might have gone right through to Pretoria, but it was too exhausting. I got my early tea all right next morning, spent the last few hours in the air, saw the flaps go down for the last landing at Pretoria.

A few days later I was back in my seaside cottage on the shores of Table Bay. For a time I felt twenty years older. I walked on the familiar sands,

plunged into the icy surf, made that deliberate effort which is far more effective than merely wishing for good health. During my leave I learnt that a new age-limit order had come into force. Captains over the age of thirty-five would no longer be sent to a theatre of war. And when I reported back to Pretoria I discovered that they had an office job at headquarters in store for me. It was too much. I remembered those headquarters, and I knew, too, that there were too many administrative officers in the South African Air Force. Many who were too old for their ranks were being released. My newspaper had a skeleton staff, and I was wanted in Cape Town. I was given a release certificate and I became a civilian again.

So for the time being my early morning tea is safe. But I have had a visitor, an old friend returning to South-West Africa after years in the army. He is going into a desert where there are no soldiers, no aircraft, no enemies – unless you count the Bushmen and the wild animals as enemies. I know my decision now, and it is the same as that which took me up the gang-plank of the Ingerid twenty-seven years ago. There is a great white castle in the wilderness, where seven men once fired from ramparts and held a native army at bay. From the tower I can see herds of blue wildebeest and gemsbok against the white dazzle of the salt pan. But what an empty feeling it will be to wake up on that lonely veld and find no morning tea.

THE END

INDEX

The index below is as it was in the original paper book but in this e-book the page numbers have all changed and have therefore been removed. Otherwise the original index is left unchanged to display the authors choice and readers should use their program's search facility to locate the item.

Abd-el-Krim	Asie (liner)
Age of savages	Assouan
Air crash	Atlantisia (rare bird)
Alamein	Aughrabies, Falls
Aldabra Islands	Auni (Bushmen)
Alexandria	
Alfred Noble (steam yacht)	Bahera
Roy Allen	Donald Bain
Ambergris	Balgowan Castle (wreck)
Amitia (yacht)	Barbieri, Emilio, et seq.
Captain Amm	Batawanas
C. J. Anderson	Bayeye
Angola, et seq	Bechuanaland Police, et seq
Antarctic (whaling)	Berg Damaras

Beira
Belgian Congo, et seq.
Captain Arthur **Bell**
Captain Dick **Bentley**
Father **Bierfert**
Carel **Birkby**
John **Black**
Blackwater fever
Blenden Hall (wreck)
Blockfontein
Blue Bay
"Oom Chris," **Botha**
Brukkaros
Bukama
Bula Matadi
Bushman dances
Bushman dogs
Bushman hunters
Bushmanland, et seq.
Bushman songs

Bushman's Paradise
Bushmen, et seq.
Bushmen as archers
Bushmen, health
Bushmen, longevity
Bushmen, murderers
Bush telegraph, et seq.

Cairo, et seq.
Calvinia
Malcolm **Campbell**, et seq.
Cargados Carajos shoals
Roger **Casement**
Capt. R. F. **Caspereuthus**
Castle (Cape Town)
Cawdor Castle (wreck)
Chamarel
Chinese in Mauritius
Neville **Clayton**
Coco-de-mer

Jacobus **Coetsee**
Lieut. Oscar **Coetzee**
Conducting a draft
Joseph **Conrad**
Continental Savoy Hotel (Cairo)
Copper Belt, (N. Rhodesia)
Coquilhatville
Fred **Cornell**
Alexander **Cotton**
Crocodiles (Okavango), et seq.
Crystal Mountains
Cubango (Angola), et seq.
Corepipe
Cutty Sark (clipper)
Cyclones
Cyprus

Prof. Raymond **Dart**
Major O. G. **Davies**
Bill Hassoldt **Davis**

Denham
Diamonds at Alexander Bay
Dodo of Mauritius
Dolphin Head
Drakenbosch Island
Drums (African), et seq.
Duke of Edinburgh (at Tristan)
Durban
Dutch East India Company

Eagle Eye Mine
Easter Cliffs
Eclipse, total, et seq.
Edward Bohlen (wreck)
Harold **Eedes**, et seq.
El Daba
Elisabethville
Dirk **Eloff**

Finns in Ovamboland

Fleet Street
Fort Diriko
Fort Kuangar
Fort Rietfontein
Freetown, et seq.
Fuka

Gambut
Gannets
Captain **Garcia**
Garrison (on Tristan)
Gemsbok Pan
Alain **Gerbault**
Gezira Club (Cairo)
Ghanzi, et seq.
Gibraltar
Capt. Noel **Gilfillan**
Gippy Memory
Gippy Tummy
Cpl. William **Glass**

Robert **Glass**
Colonel **Gordon**
Gough Island, et seq.
Grande Rosalis
Great Snake of the Orange River
Mrs. Mary **Green**
P. W. **Green**
Guildford Castle (liner)
Guns (in Ovamboland)

Major C. H. L. **Hahn**
Half-mens (tree)
Handley Page
Hastings
Heliopolis
Hell's Kloof
Hereros
Hereros at Ngami
Lord **Hewart**
E. **Heyes**

Hippo (Okavango), et seq.

Hoffman

Hollman's Bird Island

Hottentot Bay

Hottentots

Ichaboe Island, et seq.

Inaccessible Island

Ingerid (coasting steamer, et seq.)

Innisfallen (yacht)

Islander (yacht, et seq.)

Island of Dogs

Isles of Death

James Pitchers (trawler)

Jerusalem

Harris **Johns**

Ben "Kapitulo" **Johnson** (et seq.)

Juan de Nova

Juba

Jutten Island

Kalkfontein

Chief **Kaluvi**

Kano Vlei

Chieftainess **Kanuni**

Kaokoveld, et seq.

Karakul, et seq.

Karakuvisa

Karnak

Kasama

Katanga

Lieut. Charles **Kearey**

Kenhardt

Casper **Keytel**

Kiabo

Kilimanjaro

Kimberley

Kinshasa

Kling, H.

Kokerboom (tree)

James **Kolman**

Kunene River

Kuring Kuru

Kwito River

Lake Ngami, et seq.

Jonathan **Lambert**

Lehututu

Brian **Lello**

Leprosy

A. D. **Lewis**

Robert **Lewis**

David **Livingstone**

Lobito Bay

Geoffrey **Long**

Capt. J. **Lorentz**

Lourenco Marques

Lualaba River

F. A. **Luderitz**

Luderitzbucht, et seq.

Lusaka

Luxor

Ma'aten Bagush

Madeira

Mahebourg

Mahembo

W. J. **Makin**

Malagas Island

Chief **Mandume**

Major C. N. **Manning**

Marcus Island

Matadi

Wilhelm **Mattenklodt**

Maun

Mauritius, et seq.

Meob

Mercury Island, et seq.

Dr. Hans **Merensky**

Meresteyn, treasure wreck

Michelin (river steamer, et seq.)

George **Miller**

Missionaries (Okavango)

Mister Milo, see Barbieri

Capt., B. **Morrel**

Mossel Bay

Mountains of the Moon

Munu, (mystery animal)

Poudre d'Or

Praslin Island

Pretoria

Pretoria-Cairo by air

Prince Charles (river steamer, et seq.)

Prince Leopold (river steamer, et seq.)

Col. Denys **Reitz**

Frances **Repetto**

Repulse; battle-cruiser

Reunion Island

Cecil **Rhodes**

Richtersveld, et seq.

Richtersveld Hottentots

Robben Island

Rose Belle

Round Island

Royal Air Force, et seq.

Runtu

Nairobi

Namaqualand

Napoleon

Naron (Bushmen)

Native surgery

Nautilus (coasting steamer)

Netheravon

Nightingale Island

Noki

Nossob River

Nuragas
Nyangana

Octopus
Okavango, et seq.
Old Abraham (Bushman)
Olifant's Kloof
Capt. Morch **Olsen**
Omuramba Omatako, et seq.
Ondonga
Chief **Oorlog**
Orange River, et seq.
Ovamboland, et seq.

Palestine
Pamplemousses
Panther (German gunboat)
George **Pauling**
Fred **Peters**, (et seq.)
Harry **Pidgeon**, (et seq.)

Pidgin English
Pofadder
Pomona
Ponthierville
Port Gentil
Port Louis, Mauritius
Port Said
Possession Island, et seq.

Saddle Hill
St. Helena
Sandwich Harbour
Sakania
Saldanha Bay, et seq,
Sarie Marais (yacht)
Savanne
W. C. **Scully**
Sealing, et seq.
Sendeling's Drift
Seychelles

Lance-Sgt. **Sieberhagen**, (et seq.)
Sierra Leone, et seq.
Captain **Sinclair**
Sollum
Frank **Solomon**
Shirley **Solomon**
South African Air Force, et seq.
South-West Africa, et seq.
South-West Africa, coast, et seq.
Spencer Bay
Sperrgebiet
Springbok migration
Stanley Falls
Stanleyville
August **Stauch**
Steeple Rock
Steinkopf
Andre **Steytler**
Stoltenhoff, brothers
Succulent plants, et seq.

Suez
Thomas **Swain**
Sylvia Hill
Syria

Table Bay Docks
Tamarin
Thysville
Tigerfish (Okavango), et seq.
Father **Tobias**
Tobruk
Trawling, et seq.
Treasure on Tristan
Trek-boers, et seq.
Tristan da Cunha, et seq.
Tromelin Islands

B. Uppington
Uppington, town
Utile (wreck)

Uxbridge

Captain **Van Ryneveld**

Verneuk Pan, et seq.

Victoria Falls

Villa Victoria (Cairo)

Wadi Halfa

Waika

Jock **Waldron**

Walmer Castle

Walvis Bay

Whaling, et seq.

Capt. Arnold **Wienholt**

Commander Frank **Wild**

Rev. Harold **Wilde**

Sir Hubert **Wilkins**

Dave **Wilson**

Windhoek

Hendrik **Witbooi**

Witchcraft (Okavango)

Wonder Hole

S. S. **Xema**

Desmond **Young**, et seq.

Zanzibar, et seq.